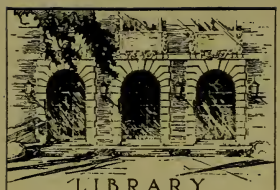

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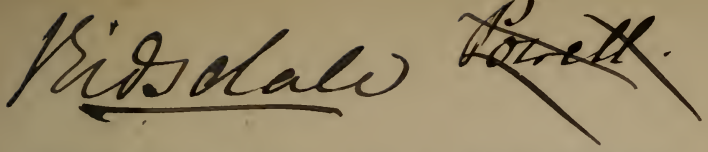
THE WOOING OF CATHERINE

AND

OTHER TALES.

VOL. II.



THE WOOING OF CATHERINE

AND OTHER TALES

BY

E. FRANCES POYNTER

AUTHOR OF

"MY LITTLE LADY,"

ETC., ETC.

"The changing guests, each in a different mood,
Sit at the roadside table, and arise—"
D. G. ROSSETTI.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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A TRAGIC HERO.

A TRAGIC HERO.

'Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man.'

CHAPTER I.

'The most tragic young man I ever knew,' said Madame Sophie R——, 'was also the most comic. His was a very little history —a history really so little that I almost hesitate to offer it in these pathological and psychological days when crime and disease engage all our attention. My good young Baron would not have committed a crime for the world! Still, in his trifling way, he entertained and interested me at the time

I knew him. Perhaps, who knows? he might also interest you.

I made his acquaintance some years ago, in one or two October weeks that I spent at the little Alpine village of Sonnenplatz. I was on my way to Italy when I wrote to propose a passing visit to some friends who had taken up their winter residence at one of the Sonnenplatz hotels. Their answer was 'come,' and towards the middle of October I took my place in the diligence and went. A grand road leads through mountain passes to the high valley where Sonnenplatz spreads itself among green meadows. All the surrounding peaks, I remember, were flushed with a dying sunset as the diligence wound slowly upwards and entered a narrow gorge; and the twilight was deepening into night as we entered the more open valley above. It was quite dark by the time I reached the hotel. There lights flashed upon me,

friendly voices greeted me. Out of the chill darkness I passed into a homelike atmosphere of warmth and comfort.

I was seated next day after luncheon on the gravel terrace in front of the hotel; benches were set there and chairs, and round tables fitted each with a white umbrella as a shelter against the ardent sun. In front the valley spread wide between receding mountain slopes to where one distant peak that closed the view rose against the sky of Italy. A softer hue, one fancied, a more dreamlike blue tinged that far off sky than the intense heaven overhead. On either side rose the nearer hills, dark with pinewoods, and scarred by bare water-courses, in whose sunless crevices still lingered the remains of the last light fall of snow. At their feet lay the cheerful life of the valley, tinkling herd-bells, grey-roofed barns and chalets, yellow-green meadows, where a clear stream glanced

like a thread of sunlight through the fading sward. As I write, I see again the cheerful friendly scene, a scene without romance or mountain grandeur, yet charming through that tranquil cheer and friendly peace. I had but lately passed through a time of very great anxiety and trouble, when mind and body had alike been tried and alike demanded rest. And here the sun shone, the pure air brought with it fresh life and vigour, friends were at hand —I have known few brighter days than those which shone upon that homely Alpine valley.

I was seated then basking idly in the sunshine, when my friends' two little girls, Jenny and Lucy Meadows came running up, each hugging a kitten which they deposited, as a token of friendship, headforemost in my lap.

'Dear Madame R——' they cried, 'do come and see our other kittens.'

'More kittens?' I said.

'Yes, down there in the barn, but the old cat will not let us go near them. We want to tame her, if we can.'

They led the way down the steep bank on which the hotel stood, across the road to a long wooden barn in the low meadow beyond. There was no light except from the open door; but we groped our way over the uneven floor to where out of the dimness two eyes shone, and small black things could be seen moving about.

'There they are,' Lucy said, in a loud whisper, 'and there is the cat looking at us. You see, she won't let us touch them.'

I stood looking on, so much interested in watching the cat and the children that I was unaware that another person had entered the barn, till a voice close behind me made me start and turn.

'And how do the kittens do to-day?' it said.

The accent was foreign, the voice was young and fresh, and belonged to a fresh young person, a handsome girl of twenty or thereabouts, tall and rather stout, with a brilliant colour, a good-tempered smile, and the slight hesitation in speaking a foreign tongue that gives the charm of apparent diffidence to an otherwise perfectly self-possessed person. She was handsomely and carelessly dressed in a sealskin jacket and cap and a great deal of fur muffling her neck under a quantity of dark hair that fell in confusion down her back. This picturesque person seemed well-known to the children; they greeted her as Miss Vera, and pulled her forward by both hands.

'Let me see your little cats,' she said, 'what, the big one will not let you touch them? See, I will make her come to me if you will fetch me a saucer of milk.'

'I am going to the house to fetch a

shawl,' I said, 'and I will bring you some milk. No, thank you, my dear;' this to Jenny, 'the shawl is in my box; you could not find it.'

I found the shawl, I asked for and procured some milk, and was walking with some care down the steep path leading to the road, when a young man with his hat pulled low over his eyes, came rushing up with such impetuosity that he dashed the saucer from my hand, dividing the milk between my dress and the ground. He stood still instantly, with an expression of horror; then suddenly dropped on his knees before me.

'Good heavens, what have I done?' he said, taking my gown in both hands, 'the dress is ruined, absolutely ruined.'

'Not at all,' I said, 'the gown will wash; there is no harm done, I assure you. Pray think no more about it,' I went on, for he continued to kneel before me, looking so

intensely tragic that I could hardly help laughing, 'or if you would kindly fetch me another saucer of milk from the hotel, I should be much obliged to you.'

He got up slowly, gazing the while at my gown. I saw then that he was a very ugly young man, with a round, snub-featured face, a dark ruddy complexion, and black hair standing on end. He was not quite twenty-one, as he himself told me later, when I had become great friends with Baron Friedrich S——, but he looked older. At first sight, I imagined him to be three or four-and-twenty.

I sat down on the bank and awaited his return. In a minute he came back with the milk, looking much more composed.

'You will allow me to carry this for you wherever you are going,' he said, speaking in fairly good French, but with a strong German accent, 'it is the only compensation I can offer for my awkwardness.'

'I am going to the barn,' I said, pointing to it as I spoke. 'Mrs. Meadows' children have some kittens there.'

'Mrs. Meadows' children—ah, I know; they are nice little girls.'

He said no more, and I too was silent, for I saw that his mind was for the moment wholly given to carrying the saucer in safety. He brought so much honest effort and so much simplicity to the accomplishment of this feat, holding the saucer tight with both hands, never raising his eyes from it as he walked along, that I had quite a friendly feeling for him by the time we reached the barn-door. There he handed the milk with a sigh of relief, and lifting his hat was about to leave me, when he caught sight of Miss Vera, who was still watching the cat and talking to the children. His face brightened, then it clouded again; with a stride he crossed the threshold and followed me

up the barn. Miss Vera did not move as the young man approached; nor, beyond a swift sidelong glance, recognize his presence in any way; and for a moment he stood beside her in silence.

'So you are here,' he said at last gloomily, speaking as before, in French; 'I have been looking for you everywhere. Shall we take our walk now?'

'With pleasure,' she said, smiling, but without looking at him. 'First, though, I am going to tame these little cats.'

'Then it will be too late,' he said, with increasing gloom; 'if we are going, we had better start at once. I have been looking for you for the last hour. Why do you try to evade me?'

'Evade you?' said Miss Vera, raising her eyebrows with an air of great surprise. Then deliberately drawing on one glove that she had taken off: 'Well—then we

will start at once,' she said; 'I will tame these another day.'

She put her arm through his and they walked away together. As for me, I felt an interest so lively in this young couple, in the blooming and smiling maiden, in the awkward and tragic youth, that on presently leaving the children and the kittens together, I sought out my friends to question them on the subject.

'Who,' I inquired, 'is the handsome girl, and who the ugly young man?'

My friend, Mrs. Meadows, who has a charming turn for gossip, and is able to enliven the dullest sojourn by the fresh interest she brings to bear on her fellow-creatures, was able to satisfy my curiosity at once. Indeed, the first-comer could have done so, since I had alighted, I found, upon a romance whose vivacious and varying progress was engaging the attention of the entire hotel. The young lady was

a Russian; the young man a German, Baron Friedrich S——. She was spending the autumn at Sonnenplatz with her mother, an invalid; he was alone. These two young people had spent at least a month in each other's society, scarcely conscious, as it seemed, of each other's existence, when it suddenly occurred to them one day to fall in love. In little more than a week after this first inspiration, the affair was settled; the mother gave her consent and benediction; the young couple were engaged.

'And were ever afterwards going to be happy?' I inquired, disappointed, I confess. The story so far was a trifle commonplace, and few as were the words I had exchanged with my gloomy young acquaintance, I had hoped better things of him. And in fact, I was presently reassured. No one yet knew whether they were to be happy or not, since the young

baron was dependent upon a father in Germany, and until his consent to the engagement was gained nothing could be held as settled. Now, a German doctor living in Sonnenplatz and acquainted with Baron Friedrich and his family, had expressed his confident opinion that the old baron's consent would never be given to the proposed marriage. Who knew anything of these Russians? No one—the doctor said—or, at least, no one knew any good; quite the contrary, indeed. As for the young people, they might, if they pleased, amuse themselves by falling in love, *pour passer le temps;* but the marriage would assuredly never take place. So the doctor affirmed. They themselves, Mrs. Meadows added, had perhaps some presentiment of the fact; for whereas they had been at first inseparable, walking, talking, laughing together through the entire day, there had latterly been a change. Some shadow,

some cloud seemed to have passed between them.

So much had I heard of their history, when they themselves appeared, coming slowly towards us up the road to the hotel. I looked at them with a still livelier interest than before; chiefly, perhaps, at the young Baron, whose face, ugly though it was, yet pleased me better through its expression of honesty and an excellent nature, than the blooming countenance of Miss Vera. She looked both blooming and cheerful as she came up and paused with a pretty smile to speak for a moment with my friends. Baron Friedrich, on the contrary, had a gloomy, almost a scowling aspect, as merely raising his hat, he went on into the house. And yet something in the young fellow interested me; I should like, I felt, to see more of him; and as fate would have it, that very evening chance threw him once more in my way.

I had gone out after dinner to take a walk along the road in the frosty starlight. It was somewhat late when I started; a young moon had already set, and the road ran obscurely white above the shrouded meadows, to be presently lost in a silent darkness beyond. But it was a darkness of the mountains, lighted by blazing and flashing stars; and the silence of a valley, filled with the sound of falling waters, the rush of a distant torrent descending from snow-bound passes, the nearer dash of a waterfall that leaped from rock to rock down a neighbouring hill. I had gone some little distance along the road, and was standing listening to these lonely voices gathering and falling on the ear in the stillness of the night, when there was a sound of rapid footsteps along the road. The next moment some one ran up against me as I stood in the shadow of the bank.

'I beg your pardon,' said a voice that seemed not unknown to me, and in the same instant I recognised Baron Friedrich S——. Though rather startled, this second encounter was so like our first that I could not help laughing.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, still more remorsefully. 'I hope I have not hurt you.'

'We seem destined to stumble against each other,' I said. 'No, you have not hurt me in the least, thank you. Will you walk back with me to the hotel? This road is lonely, and somewhat darker than I like.'

He willingly complied, and began to talk instantly as we turned and walked on side by side. Indeed, he became at once so confidential, and so excited in his confidences, that I began to wonder vaguely whether he had not had more than enough of the champagne I had seen him drinking

at dinner. He was not in the least confused, only excited—*exalté*. But I believe I may have done him an injustice. He was at all times, I found, an excitable youth.

He began by rhapsodizing about the night, the stars, the mountains, the torrent, I know not what besides, all in his strongly accented French; for as he spoke but little English, and I at that time spoke not much German, French was our medium of communication. From the night he proceeded to infinity, eternity, the abysses of existence. He had sounded them, he said; he knew their hollow depths, he knew the profound despair that awaited the rash explorer of the sounding spaces of the infinite; he had drunk of the empty cup of life, he had tasted its bitter ashes; he had looked through the darkness of time into the blackness of eternity, and he had felt that

self-destruction was the only fitting close to the tragedy of existence.

Startled, though interested, by these wild outpourings, by this revelation of a fiery and desperate spirit hidden under the ordinary aspect of an ordinary young man, I attempted to calm him with such soothing and common-place remarks as occurred to me at the moment. Life was not all bitter ashes, I remarked, endeavouring to follow his somewhat confused metaphors; there were some hearths that still glowed with a friendly warmth; there were pleasant surfaces spread over the most hollow depths, moments of pure enjoyment—Here he shook his head. Such he might once have known, but he had outlived them all. Suicide was his only refuge; and he spoke this time with such tragic effect, that I half expected to see him pull a pistol out of his pocket and shoot himself on the spot.

Really alarmed, and in the hope of diverting his thoughts, I touched upon a theme to which I should have otherwise never dreamed of alluding on so short an acquaintance. I had understood, I ventured to say, that whatever the past might have been, he had at this moment reasons for being reconciled with life—I paused, confronted by my own indiscretion; but the change on his part was instantaneous. True, he cried enthusiastically, he had a reason, he had every reason, to be reconciled with life—or with death, for love made all things equal, and life and death were one. I had seen her, had I not? Was she not beautiful, was she not divine? His Princess, he called her. Was she not like a Princess with her dark flowing hair and her glorious eyes? Life—what was life? What was a life's devotion for such as she? Too slight a thing to be named before her. Let death come rather.

Yes, to die, to taste the rapture for her sake of breathing his last sigh at her feet, that should be his choice.

We had reached the hotel by this time, and I own that I was more than content to see the lights in the hall, the waiters standing about, to hear the sound of a familiar waltz coming from the music-room. Another half-hour in the darkness and the starlight might be too much, I felt, for a young man so resolutely bent on self-destruction for one reason or another; and it will be understood readily, that, however he might have aroused my sympathies, I had no desire to see a Werther-like tragedy enacted at my very feet. I was greatly relieved, then, when I saw the Baron turn into the dining-room, and heard him call for a bottle of soda-water in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice. Half-an-hour later, feeling still uneasy, I came downstairs and found him walking

up and down the corridor with his princess. Both were talking and laughing very loud in the most unsentimental manner imaginable. I went to bed with an easy mind.

CHAPTER II.

Looking out of my window early next morning, I saw signs below of a departure. Two Einspanners stood before the door; beside them was the porter with a bundle of rugs and wraps in his hand; a small portmanteau and a large travelling-bag lay on the ground. It was quite early; the hoar-frost had not yet melted from the pale meadows; thin bands of mist were drawn across the slopes, and extended far down the valley; below lay the village, still and shadowless in the sunless dawn. But the peaks rose clear-cut against the pale blue sky; the western snow was already

touched with gold; and the morning was so fresh, pure, and cloudless that I envied the travellers their early drive.

I went downstairs. Early rising is in fashion at Sonnenplatz, and the hotel world was already astir. In a moment Lucy and Jenny Meadows came running out, wild with glee in the keen air, each hugging a kitten.

'Who is going away, Jenny?' I inquired. For Jenny had inherited her mother's talent, and always knew everything, I found.

'Oh, only the Baron and Miss Vera and her mother,' she cried, 'they are going to St. Michael, but only for three days; then they are coming back again.'

St. Michael, a little mountain village, a day's drive from Sonnenplatz, is famous for its baths and mineral waters, and for the brief summer gaiety that blooms and dies during the few fine weeks of the year.

I had thought the season already over; and so no doubt it was. But mountains and lakes remain unmoved by the departure of water-drinkers; a hotel or two might probably remain open; and the travellers, I presumed, were going in search of a picturesque change rather than in search of dissipation. I again envied them their drive on this lovely October morning.

As Jenny finished speaking, they appeared; Miss Vera fresh, smiling, and picturesque with her dark hair hanging over her brown sealskin; her mother—I had not seen her before—a little brown and witchlike woman with her face tied up in a white handkerchief; lastly, the Baron in a long fur coat, carrying Miss Vera's cloak and handbag and umbrella. I felt some uncertainty as to how we should meet after his gloomy confidences of the previous night; but he seemed to be in

great spirits, and at once greeted me with a most friendly smile.

'We are going for a little excursion,' he said, 'but we shall be back again immediately.'

'You have a fine day,' I remarked, looking up at the cloudless sky.

'Divine!' he cried, 'a morning to make one feel new-born in Paradise. We shall enjoy ourselves immensely—immensely. Au revoir, madame.'

He carefully placed Miss Vera's possessions in the first Einspanner, helped her to seat herself by her mother, then springing into the second carriage: 'Off!' he cried, standing up and waving his hat. The drivers cracked their whips, the horses' bells jingled, and off they drove through the frosty air towards the white eastern glow whence the sun, still low behind the mountains, would presently arise upon us.

That day I went for a long drive with my friends to search out the hidden glories of the hills. For if the scenery of our Sonnenplatz was somewhat tame and prosaic, it was far otherwise when the road, turning aside from the flat stream-watered meadows, wound upward among the mountains. There the valley narrowed, and the torrent foamed in its rocky bed, the peaks rose higher and higher before us and around, chalets, deserted now, stood upon high green alps, the forests failed as they climbed the steep precipices. Once we passed a great mountain shoulder clothed with the dark green of the Alpine rhododendron. It had been one sheet of rose-red, I was told, in the early summer; but the flowers were all gone now. The flowers were gone everywhere; only a few gentians were left, a few autumn crocuses fading in the fading grass. For though the sun shone hot overhead in a summer sky, winter was

close at hand; already snowdrifts lay white in shadowy corners, here and again frozen waterfalls were clinging to the rocks, and icicles fringed the sunless edges of the torrent. And yet everywhere new light and colour had kindled over the mountains and the forest; it seemed a world of frost and fire burning to its end under the blue heavens. Scarlet bushes flamed against the hill-side, the red and yellow of the changing larches made a sudden glory as of sunlight among the darkness of the pines; and every little leaf that crept along the ground had taken tints of orange and crimson and gold and purple-red, a hundred different hues and contrasts melting into one ruddy glow over the distant slopes. In a few weeks, in a few days perhaps, all would be changed; the larches would stand stripped and grey, a uniform whiteness replace all this glow and radiance.

And the very next day a change came.

Clouds gathered over the mountains, parting, meeting, breaking again; rolling vapours filled the valley; a snow-laden wind arose, then fell in snowy flakes floating so thickly in the still air that hardly could the opposite hills be seen through the white mist. There was no sitting out-of-doors that afternoon; instead of the fresh pine-scent came a smell of burning wood; instead of sunshine, the doubtful joy of stoves. It was a change adapted to please no one. I was not surprised, therefore, on going down to dinner after a long afternoon spent in letter-writing, to find most people depressed and not a few people cross.

'I had not expected this, I own,' said a pale lady seated next to me. 'At this season, and after yesterday too, this kind of weather is not at all what I had been led to expect at Sonnenplatz.'

'I have been wondering,' I said, with such cheerfulness as I could muster,

'what has become of the travellers who left yesterday morning, Madame W—— and her daughter, I mean. They must be even worse off at St. Michael than we find ourselves here, and should much snow have fallen in the passes they may have some difficulty in returning.'

'For my part, I should not be sorry if they stayed away altogether,' said my pale neighbour, 'I consider them no acquisition to our society; none whatever. Quite the reverse, indeed.'

'You do not like Madame W—— and her daughter?' I said. 'I thought them interesting. The girl is handsome; and though the mother, whom indeed I have hardly seen, is not attractive-looking——'

'Attractive-looking! My dear Madame R——! Madame W—— attractive-looking! Do you know who and what she is? A gambler—a professional gambler; nothing less, I assure you.'

'A gambler—you surprise me,' I said; and as I spoke, my thoughts flew to my foolish and impulsive young acquaintance. the Baron. In what foolish dilemma had he set himself? 'Are you quite sure?' I said.

'Perfectly certain—as certain as I can be without having actually seen her at the Monte Carlo tables. And that of course would be impossible; I should never dream of going there. But I have it on the best authority, and I have no doubt she has gone over to St. Michael on some such errand now.'

'But there are no gambling-tables,' I said, 'at St. Michael.'

'My dear Madame R——, there is *private* gambling everywhere for people who desire it.' And with the words she rose, dinner being ended, leaving me to meditate on this suggestion of limitless iniquity.

Coming out into the hall from the dining-room, I saw a large letter, addressed with many flourishes to Baron Friedrich S—— lying on the hall-table. My attention was directed to it by a ray of moonlight fallen across the white envelope through the glass upper half of the front door. The snow had ceased then; I wrapped my shawl more closely round me, opened the door and went out. What a night it was! The storm was over and gone. Some sudden change had swept the sky clear, and the retreating clouds lay piled in fleecy masses far down the valley; overhead a half moon was setting towards the mountains among scattered stars in a sky of ethereal blue; the air was still and intensely cold, and a light covering of snow lay everywhere. An impulse seized me; I went back into the house, and wrapping myself in furs, presently sallied forth again to brave the snow, which indeed was but an inch or

two deep, and made my way up the steep hill at the back of the hotel to the pine-woods. A narrow pathway wound up the bare slope and was presently lost in a wider path leading through the forest to summer alps above. I did not venture far; for though I had once before been there by daylight, the moonlight and the shadows, the drifted snow and crossing tracks confused me now; I paused near the edge of the wood and looked back through an opening in the trees. Below me lay the valley, wide and white and faintly clear beneath the moonlit and star-lit sky; yellow lights shone from the clustered houses of the village and from scattered châlets beneath the hills, a warm glow as of human fellowship reaching across the empty wastes of snow. But all about in clear moonlight and deepest shadow stood the pine-trees, strange, mysterious, with outstretched, motionless

branches in the mysterious silence of the night. Not a breath of air was stirring; in silent fellowship they stood, in secret confidence, in unspoken sympathy with each other and with the night. What had such as I to do among them? A weird sense of loneliness came over me, as of one standing in an alien world, remote from human life.

What was this? A figure rushing up the moonlit slope, wildly gesticulating, disappearing in the darkness of the trees. Could it be—— Something not unknown in form and gesture seemed to reveal to me the presence of my young friend, the Baron.

This intruder had broken the spell of the mysterious hour. It was cold, I found; it was more than lonely; and I made my way back quickly to the hotel. A fresh track of wheels showed itself on the snow outside; within, the letter was gone from the

hall-table. It was, then, in fact, the Baron that I had seen? But what, oh, what could have happened?

My room was on the second floor of the hotel, near the end of a long corridor. On the one side it had no communication with any other apartment; on the other there was a door leading into a large bed-room. Now, it is well-known to everyone, that neither scruples the most honourable, no, nor yearnings the most profound for silence and for quiet, avail to shut out all consciousness of one's neighbours in a hotel; and though my door was locked and protected by a curtain, I had not been long unaware that the room adjoining mine was occupied by Madame W—— and her daughter. My conjecture that they had returned from St. Michael was confirmed then as soon as I went upstairs that night; for the silence that for two days had reigned in their apartment was broken

now. Slight movements indicated their presence; voices went on in a peaceful murmur; occasionally a few words in French or in Russian could be distinguished; yes, the travellers had come back.

A furious knocking at their door, a lock violently burst open, a tornado, a whirlwind, one would say, entering their room. I heard a chair or two knocked over; I heard a faint exclamation from Miss Vera; and I guessed that my fiery and vehement young Baron had come to pay them a visit. It was now past ten o'clock; all the lights downstairs were put out; reluctant therefore, though I was, to be even remotely present at what, judging from the raised voices, would be a stormy interview, there was no way of escape. The confused mixture of tongues, however, French, German, and Russian all going at once, prevented my distinguishing any one of them clearly; the inconvenience and

annoyance were on my side alone. Seeing no prospect of rest, I employed myself with some packing, and could only trust that the Baron might presently depart, and leave me, no less than his friends, in peace. And, in fact, in the very height of the storm came a lull. 'Jamais! jamais! jamais!' I heard the Baron exclaim passionately, with increasing vehemence at each utterance of the word. Then a door slammed violently; there was a dead silence—a silence so profound, that it affected me like a shock. I stood awaiting breathlessly whatever might come next. Screams would it be, sobs, hysterics from the two women left together? Or could they both have fainted from emotion?

At last there was a movement. A chair grated on the floor; a footstep crossed the room. 'Maman,' I heard Miss Vera say, close to my door.

An inarticulate murmur from Madame W——.

'Maman, this flounce is half-torn away. Would it be better, do you think, to mend it, or shall I take it off altogether?'

CHAPTER III.

All night it froze hard, and the morning following was brilliantly fine. It was the first severe frost of the season, and presently, as we stood outside after breakfast, in the sunshine, the children came running up in great excitement.

'There are the most beautiful icicles,' they cried. 'Madame R——, do come and see the icicles at the water-mill. Oh! there is Miss Vera; let us ask her to come too.'

I turned, and beheld Miss Vera issuing from the front door. I looked at her with interest; not a sign, not a trace of last night's storm. She issued serene and

smiling, as a goddess might issue from a cloud, unmoved by mortal woe. Not that in Miss Vera's appearance there was anything divine; no blooming maiden was ever cast in a less goddess-like mould. The children, who were very fond of her, each seized a hand and dragged her forward.

'Do come for a walk,' they said; 'we are going to see the icicles.'

'Icicles? what is it you call icicles?' said Miss Vera. 'I shall come with pleasure. Where are the little cats this morning?'

Our way lay across wide meadows, whence the snow was already melting in the hot sunshine. In the midst of the meadows stood the watermill, a big irregular brown and white châlet, with a sloping grey wooden roof, and small square windows opening on to an outside wooden gallery. The water flowed through a long wooden trough supported on heavy piles

that rose in height as the ground sank, the swift stream rushing out at the further end in a foaming fall, to wind through the meadows beyond. But all along the trough the water dripped, and as it dripped it froze, drop by drop, till all the rough beams and planks were fringed and armed with pointed glittering ice-spears of crystal clearness, like the fairy-guarded portal of some snow-queen's ice-palace; a sight so strange and beautiful that we stood gazing at it with delight. Only the children, who were not fond of standing still, presently fell with rapture to breaking off the icicles and watching them float down a transparent thread of water that ran below the trough over a pebbly bed.

Miss Vera seemed to find as much pleasure in this simple pastime as the children themselves. Yes, she found a genuine entertainment apparently, in dipping her fingers in the ice-cold water; and that with

an air of absorption that seemed to exclude every other idea. A heartless hussy, I felt half-disposed to call her in my thoughts; for the young Baron's passionate tones were still vibrating in my ears. My friends, however, who knew nothing of last night's scene, and whose heart, like the children's, had been won by Miss Vera's good-natured ways, looked on smiling at the handsome girl.

'This must remind you of a Russian winter, Miss Vera,' said Mrs. Meadows.

Miss Vera looked up. 'I do not know,' she said. 'I have not been in Russia since I was no bigger—not so big as little Jenny here.'

'Do you always travel about then?' said my friend.

'Always,' she said, getting up and rubbing her cold fingers, 'at least, no, not always. My mother, she has been backwards and forwards, and my father, too.

when he is well enough. But I was at school for a long time in Paris. Then my mother came and fetched me away, and since then we travel.'

It was a new idea to me that Miss Vera had a father. I do not know why, but it had not occurred to me before. I asked if he were now in Russia.

'No,' she said, 'he is in Rome. This cold climate does not suit him.'

We had left the mill, and were walking back now in the direction of the hotel. All at once, we beheld a tall figure appearing across the level meadows, advancing rapidly towards us with a swinging step.

'Why, there is the Baron,' cried little Jenny, 'let us run and give him an icicle.'

The poor Baron, to judge from his appearance, would have been glad of a welcome more genial than that implied by the gift of an icicle. He was pale, with dark rings round his eyes, and looked

uglier than usual as he came striding over the half-frozen meadows. He had apparently not seen Miss Vera before that day, and she received him with the utmost propriety. 'Bon jour, Baron,' she said, with a little bow and smile. The Baron could not have expected her to be demonstrative in our presence, and yet Jenny's icicle could, in fact, hardly have had a more freezing effect upon the young fellow. He grew paler than before, and turned abruptly away.

'Are you going back to the hotel?' he said. 'I will walk with you.'

These words were addressed to me, not to Miss Vera; and the rest of the party going on in front, we two were left behind. For a while we hardly spoke as we walked along. My companion was in a silent mood apparently, responding but briefly to the remarks I made. He and his friends, I presently observed, had returned sooner

from St. Michael than was expected, and he answered, 'Yes, the expedition had proved a failure; it was too late in the season. The friends Madame W—— had expected to find were gone; the hotels were shut up. Then the snow came, and they had thought it best to return.'

'That was wise,' I said, 'for although you young people might have thought it no great hardship to be snowed up on a mountain—rather, indeed, have enjoyed the adventure—Madame W—— might reasonably have taken a different view.'

'You are mistaken, madame,' he said, bitterly. 'Mademoiselle Vera would enjoy no adventure that entailed discomfort, and certainly would find my society no kind of compensation.'

Nothing is more difficult than to answer a remark of this kind. Sympathy would be resented; assent or contradiction

would be equally out of place. I hastened to change the subject.

'What a difference,' I said, 'only a few hours sometimes makes in these mountain valleys! Who could have foreseen a day like this in the midst of yesterday's storm? Last night even was quite beautiful. I went up into the pine-woods after dinner, and I never saw anything more enchanting.'

'Were you in the pine-woods, madame?' he said, in a very dismal melancholy manner. 'I also was there, but I did not see you. I was not quite myself; I had received a letter——'

'With no bad news, I trust?'

'The worst,' he said, striking his forehead with his hand—'the worst.'

Shall I own it? I was really charmed with my young friend. A more romantic young fellow, or one with a livelier appreciation of his own sufferings, I had never

come across. And yet I was sorry for him too; for if, as I felt convinced, he got no small enjoyment out of his unhappiness, his unhappiness was none the less real, as his pale and woe-begone looks sufficiently testified. 'I am sorry you have had bad news,' I said; 'I am afraid I cannot be of any use to you; but if I can, tell me.'

'You are very good, madame,' he said, with a profound sigh. 'No—no one can be of any use to me. It is my misfortune to be in a position in which I am bound by the action of others, and have myself no power to act.'

I considered a moment. 'Will you tell me about it?' I said. 'Perhaps in talking it over some remedy might suggest itself that does not appear now.'

We sat down on some logs of wood, dried by the heat of the sun. Baron Friedrich leaned forward, with his elbows on his

knees, his chin resting on his hands, uttering such profound and lamentable sighs that it was quite a relief when he spoke at last.

'There is no remedy,' he said, staring gloomily before him; 'my father refuses his consent, Madame W—— withdraws hers; all is to be at an end between us.'

'Your father has perhaps reasons——' I ventured to suggest.

'Reasons! Gracious powers, what reasons can he have? Yes, I know his reasons—Of Madame W—— I say nothing. She is the mother of my betrothed; I will not breathe a word against her, though her conduct has been cruel, most cruel. She has broken her most sacred promise and destroyed the happiness of two most devoted hearts. Madame, I shall bid you an eternal farewell. I shall not remain here. My own misery I must endure as best I can, but I cannot remain to witness *her*

suffering. Already I see traces of it. She is looking pale to-day. Do you not think her looking pale to-day?'

'I—had not remarked it,' I was obliged to own.

'Ah,' he said, 'you do not know her face as I do—Last night,' he went on, after a pause, 'we had a terrible interview. The case, madame, in brief, is this. I am in the most unfortunate position of being entirely dependent on my father; and after last night's fatal letter, Madame W—— refuses to entertain my proposals for her daughter's hand. She absolutely withdraws the consent she had already given, unless my father—no matter however, for those odious details. Enough that she refuses to sanction her daughter's engagement, unless I have the prospect of a fixed income, and that she has compelled Mademoiselle Vera to adopt her views. You remarked her manner to me this morning?'

'Yes,' I said readily, 'I had remarked that.'

'I was angry with her,' he said. 'I spoke harshly of her just now. Forget my words, madame. What she did, was done in obedience to her mother. Madame W—— is not a person to be trifled with. I own that when I left them together last night I suffered more for *her* than for myself, as I thought of all she might have to undergo at her mother's hands.'

Knowing something of what really had passed in Madame W——'s room after the Baron left it, my heart was less torn than it might otherwise have been by this suggestive picture of Miss Vera's woes. Now, I thought, was the moment for a few words of counsel and common-sense.

'Madame W—— is perfectly right, Baron,' I said, 'how can she possibly let her daughter marry you, if you have nothing to live upon? Have patience.

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Don't be heart-broken yet. I will venture to prophesy that you will neither of you die of despair, in the course of—the next twelvemonth, let us say. If at the end of that time, you are both in the same mind—'

'I know, I know,' he said, interrupting me with the utmost impatience, 'that is what people always say. A twelvemonth—an eternity! And as for being in the same mind—madame, to one who is privileged to love that adorable lady, the very idea of change is desecration.'

'But is not that,' I said, 'the more reason for waiting? Your affections will not alter, but your circumstances may. Your father may change his mind, and if so, you may be sure that Madame W—— will do so also. For after all, she is quite in the right, you know. People cannot live upon love alone, my young friend; they require food, clothes, lodging, money, in short—and more than money, an income

that can be depended upon. And not even a small income in these days——'

I could have continued for some time, talking in this strain, for I felt that I had right on my side. But I was interrupted by my companion.

'Madame,' he said, rising with a certain solemnity and standing in front of me, 'what you say is true—oh, undoubtedly true. I heard it all from Madame W—— last night. And you think that words like these can touch the heart? No, madame; you have misunderstood me, and I—' with a slight change and quiver in his voice, 'have misunderstood you. When I first saw your face, something in it touched me with an assurance of sympathy that led me to confide in you. With you I felt that I might speak heart to heart; and you answer me with words about food, and lodging, and incomes. Madame, I have been mistaken in you.'

He took off his hat with an air of dignity, and strode away over the snow, leaving me seated on the log, perfectly disconcerted. And yet, after all, I was in the right!

CHAPTER IV.

I DID not sit long. The sky had clouded over in the last half-hour, and before I reached home it had begun to snow again. As I went upstairs to my room I saw the Baron and Miss Vera walking up and down the long corridor, talking and laughing very loud, as was their custom when they were together. Miss Vera, I feel sure, had no sentiment whatever in her nature, and can have permitted none but the most prosaic and matter-of-fact love-making. At luncheon the Baron never once looked at me, though his seat was nearly opposite mine. But then he was engaged in watch-

ing Miss Vera, who sat at some little distance on the other side of the table. Madame W—— did not appear, and Miss Vera vanished before lunch was over. The Baron followed her, and I saw no more for the time of either.

Late in the afternoon, however, coming out of my room, I found Baron Friedrich wandering up and down the corridor on which, it may be remembered, Madame W——'s room opened as well as my own. All the fine spirits he had shown but now in Miss Vera's company had disappeared. He came up to me looking very disconsolate and sad.

'Madame,' he said, 'I have come to ask your forgiveness. I am afraid I was very rude to you this morning.'

'Not at all,' I answered, 'you thought me, no doubt, worldly-wise and hard-hearted as most young people think their elders who give them the benefit of their

twenty or thirty years' extra experience. But let us say no more about it.'

He looked at me in silence for a minute. 'It is not only that,' he said then, very dismally, 'your advice was good, no doubt; but it is not only a question of money. There are stories, false reports that have been spread, that are at the bottom of all my troubles. That is how my father came to write such a letter as the one I received last night—a letter that will make the despair of my whole life.'

'What stories, what reports?' I enquired, 'if any false reports have been spread—and of course I am aware such things do occasionally happen—perhaps we might be able to set them right.'

'That is not possible,' he said, with an immense sigh, shaking his head. 'The mischief is done. My father believes these stories; he is old and prejudiced. No-

thing will induce him to give the consent he has once refused."

'That seems hard, no doubt,' I said. We had walked to the end of the corridor where a lighted stove sent out a red glare, and a window showed the twilight air thick with snow—I can see it all now, and my tragic young Baron standing in front of me, an image of woe. 'That seems hard,' I repeated, 'but supposing—we will not say there is no exaggeration in the stories; there always is in these cases—but supposing they should in some measure be true? You know nothing of Madame W——, do you? You have only met her here?'

'What has that to do with it?' he said, firing up, 'I don't want to marry Madame W——. I want to marry her daughter. I do not like Madame W——. I will not say a word against her; she is the mother of my betrothed; but she is worldly,

avaricious, intriguing. She has used me cruelly. This very afternoon she separated us, when for one moment we were happy together. I do not think I shall ever forgive her.'

'But you cannot expect Mademoiselle Vera to share your opinion on that point,' I said, 'both her affection and her sense of duty as a daughter may induce her to see things from her mother's point of view rather than from yours; may they not?'

'You think her false to me?' he said, fiercely.

'I did not say so,' I answered, 'but without being false, she may very properly feel that an engagement with you against both your parents' wishes might be—imprudent, to say the least of it. Or did she, when you were discussing the subject last night, give you any reason to think otherwise?'

The poor young man's countenance fell.

'Ah, I am very unhappy,' he said, 'I am indeed most unhappy. It is exactly on that point I can gain no positive assurances from Mademoiselle Vera. Last night I will own that she seemed to me to side entirely with her mother, and I was cut to the heart. To-day I spoke to her again; for nothing should induce me to break an engagement entered upon with Madame W——'s solemn sanction, except by her own desire; but she evaded the question. She is so light-hearted and gay—I am always happy when I am with her. My God, how happy we have been together—'

He gave a sort of groan as he uttered these last words. Almost he convinced me, that he would in fact never be happy again.

'Listen,' I said, 'if you take my advice, this is what you will do. Your duty to your father you must settle with your own conscience; but as regards

Mademoiselle Vera, you cannot possibly persevere in an engagement with her, if, as is apparently the case, she very properly wishes to follow her mother's orders. That is the point you have to ascertain. See Miss Vera once more, and insist on coming to a clear understanding with her. So much you fairly owe to each other; and when you have ascertained her real feeling in the matter, you will know better what to do. Only, if I may venture to say so, should you find Mademoiselle Vera not altogether heart-broken at the idea of a separation, constancy on your side will be no virtue, but the reverse. Miss Vera will not thank you for it, and you have other affections and duties in life, Baron.'

The dinner-bell had rung, and people were issuing from their rooms. We could not stand talking any longer, and I was not sorry; for my last piece of advice was so excellent that it could not, I felt, be

improved upon. As regards the former part of my speech, I may own at once, I might have spoken very differently, had I not been convinced of Miss Vera's indifference. I half-expected to see the fiery young Baron start off again in a new rage at my last words; but he seized my hand instead, and kissing it in his impetuous fashion, disappeared down the stairs, just as Miss Vera, opening her door, appeared in a becoming dress, ready for dinner.

There was peace in the room next to mine that night, and at breakfast the next morning I saw neither the Baron nor Miss Vera. I saw neither of them all day indeed, for I went for a long drive, returning only late in the afternoon, so that I missed the luncheon hour. Later still I walked up to the châlet on the hill with the children; then leaving them to return home alone, I sat

down on a bench placed half way up the slope, to watch the changing sunset colours on the snowy view of Alps. I had sat there but some five minutes when I saw the Baron approaching with his usual rapid strides. He came and stood before me.

'I am going away,' he said.

'And that is the wisest thing you can do,' I answered, 'I am glad indeed to hear it, Baron. When do you go?'

'This evening, in half-an-hour. I have been looking for you, madame, to wish you good-bye. You were right, perfectly right, in everything you said. I have been insulted—no, never did I think one of my name and family would be so insulted. I will not remain here,' he went on, with growing excitement, 'it would gratify them too much to see a misery I could not conceal. Among strangers, in a spot where I am unknown,

it will be easy to put an end to an existence such as mine.'

'No such thing,' I said, 'no one yet put an end to his existence that we know of. That is a matter of pure hypothesis, you know; and until it is a proved fact, I really advise you, Baron, to let your existence alone. Why do you not go back to Germany? It would be surely the wisest thing you could do.'

'I don't know that,' he said, 'my home is not a happy one.'

He sat down beside me and began to talk of his life, of the early death of his mother, of a harsh and unloving father, of all his youth embittered by a sense of ugliness and awkwardness and a hopeless craving for affection and sympathy. He spoke very quietly, though with tears in his eyes; I felt more true sympathy with him then, than through all his romantic ravings. And yet, when he came to speak

of Miss Vera, the poor boy broke down altogether. Yes, he had thought that she really loved him, awkwardness, ugliness, all; and now that he had discovered she was only a heartless schemer, it nearly broke his heart.

'Miss Vera is heartless, no doubt,' I answered. 'I doubt if she be a schemer; she leaves that part I imagine to her mother, whilst she amuses herself. Or if she have a heart, you at least have not found it; and believe me, it is well for you, as you yourself will see some time or other.'

'Never,' he said, in his romantic style, 'there are some feelings that can never be effaced, that one would not wish to be effaced. And that,' he went on, more quietly, 'is one reason why I do not at present wish to return to Germany. My father has a marriage in view for me that he wishes to arrange.'

'Indeed!' I said, and considered a moment. 'Naturally,' I said then, 'I can understand that at present any such idea must be very distasteful to you. But apart from that, is it a marriage you object to?'

'How do I know?' he said gloomily, 'I have never seen her. How can I care to marry a woman I have never seen?'

We had reached the bottom of the hill by this time, for we had been walking onwards as we talked, and I could see the carriage with the Baron's portmanteau tied on behind waiting in front of the hotel. I stood still for a minute. 'Well,' I said, 'I have given you a good deal of advice in the last few days; and here is the last with which I shall trouble you. Go home to your father, and do not refuse to see the lady he wishes you to marry.'

'And if I do not take your advice?' he said, smiling a little.

'Write and tell me,' I answered.

'Ah, madame,' he said, simply, 'all my life I shall remember your kindness and rejoice to have met you. But for your goodness I should be still more miserable than I am.'

He looked really affected as he spoke, and I was glad that this farewell did not take place in front of the hotel, where there was no little excitement at the young Baron's departure. Nay, looking up, I fancied that I saw Miss Vera peeping out from behind her bed-room curtain. The poor young fellow looked quite red and embarrassed when he saw the crowd that had assembled to see him off. And need I say that everyone knew not only the events of the last few days, but a great deal besides that had never happened?

The doctor came up the gravel path just as the Baron had settled himself in the carriage, and the driver was gathering up the reins.

'You are going away?' he said. 'That is right.'

'And what the devil may it concern you one way or the other?' said the Baron, growling. And in the same moment the driver raised his whip, the horse started off, my young Baron was gone.

CHAPTER V.

I WENT back into the hotel, feeling a blank in my life. It was astonishing how the young fellow had filled my thoughts for the last three days, how much he had interested me, how anxious I felt about him. Indeed, I felt extremely anxious. For without attaching too much importance to his wild talk, what more natural than that a young man in desperate mood should commit some rash deed on a moment's impulse. I expressed these fears to Mrs. Meadows.

'My dear,' she said, 'I do wonder that with your knowledge of the world, you should give yourself a moment's uneasi-

ness. Depend upon it, in a week, Baron Friedrich will have forgotten Miss Vera as completely almost as if she had never existed.'

And this I thought so unfeeling that I could forgive Mrs. Meadows only in remembering that she did not know the Baron as well as I did.

This was on Saturday. On Wednesday morning I was to leave Sonnenplatz, and during the next three days my time was so fully occupied that I own I presently forgot to make myself uneasy about the Baron. I felt as if I had spent weeks rather than days at Sonnenplatz. Every detail of the friendly little place had become familiar to me, and I liked it all. I liked the monotony and the variety alike; the hotel life with its stirring incidents, ten minutes long; the sleepy village, where the shops stood closed half the day; the alternations of snow and sunshine, the

storms gathering and clearing on the mountain sides, the winter days set in summer skies of heavenly blue; I liked the peace of the wide valley, the fresh health-giving, pine-scented air. Late on Tuesday I went to take my last walk in the pine-woods. It was a silent windless afternoon, the sky all one grey cloud, with now and then a pale sun appearing through drifting vapours. The pine-trees stood around me dark and motionless; between the scattered trunks I could see the mountains opposite, indigo blue with snowy summits against the low grey sky. All about me, lopped branches lay strewn and roots of trees; the woodcutters had been at their work. But they were gone now, and the sound of waters falling in the distance, far-off noises rising from the valley, the song and chirp of a bird hard by, alone disturbed the forest silence. It was a still melancholy waiting day, as of a

dying world. I sat leaning against a stone, with thoughts that soon strayed far from that quiet Alpine valley; it was with a start that I came back suddenly to Sonnenplatz, at the sound of a footstep close at hand. I had heard no one approach along the path thickly strewn with pine-needles; and my astonishment is not to be expressed in words, when looking round, I saw the Baron. I am not superstitious; but a thought of wraiths appearing at the moment of death, did pass through my mind before his voice re-assured me.

'You are surprised to see me, madame,' he said; and no doubt I was staring at him as if he were in very truth a ghost.

'I certainly am,' I answered, 'I thought you were gone—half-way to Germany by this time. What has brought you back?'

'You told me to write if I did not take

your advice,' he said, 'but you see I have done better. I have come back myself to tell you.'

'I do not think it is better at all,' I said, 'I think it is exceedingly foolish. You have returned, I suppose, to renew this silly affair that I had hoped was broken off. However, I cannot stay to discuss it. I leave Sonnenplatz early to-morrow morning, and I must return to the hotel to finish my packing.'

'On my word of honour,' said the Baron, standing before me with his hand on his heart as I was about to rise, 'I have no intention whatever of having anything further to do with those ladies whose acquaintance I made here. That is an episode that already seems to belong to a remote past. A disillusion, madame, is like a death from which one rises another, a transformed being; only, between oneself and the past stands an open grave. Such

a grave I have passed through in these last days.'

'You are a very singular young man,' I could not help saying; and I feel sure he took it as a compliment. 'But why have you come back to Sonnenplatz?'

'Why should I not come back?' he said. 'I have friends here, I like the hotel, I like the place, the air agrees with me. Why should I be kept away by two people who have become perfectly indifferent to me?'

'In three days!' I said.

'Dear madame, what is time?' he answered. 'Are there not days that seem years, moments that our sufferings expand to an eternity? You tell me,' he continued, walking by my side, 'that it is three days since I left Sonnenplatz, and counted by the clock it may be so; but measured by my emotions, my whole life before has hardly seemed so long.'

'Very good,' I replied, 'but to ordinary mortals three days, neither more nor less, have elapsed since you left Sonnenplatz. Everything is just as it was; the hotel has not moved, Mademoiselle Vera and her mother are still here, and you will have to meet them.'

'As strangers,' he said, 'I give you my word of honour, madame, I can meet them as perfect strangers. I no longer think of those ladies, except with a momentary indignation at the way in which I was treated.'

'That is well,' I said. 'But if I were you, I would forgive them entirely. You have had so much enjoyment in these last three weeks——'

'Enjoyment!' he said, staring at me. 'Ah yes,' with a deep sigh, 'there were a few days when I thought I knew what happiness is.'

'That is not quite what I meant,' I

answered, 'there are different kinds of happiness, you know. Confess whether you have not found a certain enjoyment as well as pain in these varied emotions through which you have been passing.'

If my young Baron had a fault, it was deficiency in the sense of humour. And yet I am glad he did not find out that I was laughing at him.

'You are right,' he said, very seriously after a pause, 'I would not have been without this experience; it has been an initiation. Life can never again be to me what it has been.'

'And now,' I said, 'you will go back to Germany, and see this lady whom your father wishes you to marry.'

'Do not speak of that,' he said, quite naturally and so despondingly, that I felt sorry for him, as I always did when we had been talking together for a little while. 'I have no desire to marry. I am too

ugly and too awkward for any woman to care for me, and I do not wish for an unloving wife.'

'That is all nonsense,' I said. 'I am persuaded you would do your best to make any woman happy whom you might marry, and she would think you neither ugly nor awkward, you may be sure. So, should you happen to like the lady you speak of, don't think of yourself at all, but do what you can to make her like you. I have no doubt whatever you will succeed.'

This was the very last piece of advice I gave Baron Friedrich. We had reached the hotel by this time, and behold, standing at the door, Miss Vera. She may possibly have seen the Baron arrive, for she looked neither surprised nor discomposed. He raised his hat, she bowed slightly; and this was the only greeting that passed between these young people, inseparable but

two weeks ago. The Baron's cure seemed, in fact, to be radical.

I spent the winter in Italy. It was on the banks of the Arno and the Tiber, among ilexes and stonepines, palaces and art-galleries, that I received letters from my friends telling me of the drifting snow-storms, the frozen waterfalls, the ice-bound lakes of the white upper world where they were dwelling. The Baron was gone, Mrs. Meadows presently wrote to me. He had stayed a fornight only after my own departure; they had seen little of him, as he had German friends at another hotel with whom he spent most of his time. Had he gone to Germany? I wrote to enquire. But Mrs. Meadows could not tell me. I supposed that I should never hear of my young Baron again.

Three months later I was in Rome.

Coming down to dinner one day, I thought I heard accents familiar to me. I looked round, and there, taking his place at a small side-table, was Baron Friedrich. Not alone; with him was a very pretty, very fair-haired little girl. She did not look more than sixteen; she had the prettiest blue eyes in the world, and a sort of infantine grace and expression that were quite charming.

The Baron recognised me at once, and came flying across the room to me.

'I had a presentiment,' he said, taking both my hands, and shaking them with the utmost vehemence, 'that I should meet you in Rome. And whom could I so greatly desire to meet? Let me present to you my wife, my Amelie.'

He led me up to the table where his Amelie stood smiling. She looked first at her husband, then at me, and shook hands very willingly and cordially.

'You must dine with us,' said the impulsive young Baron. 'We will have some speeches and a toast. We owe all our happiness to you. Do we not, Amelie, owe all our happiness to madame?' Amelie again looking at her husband and then at me, answered, 'Yes, yes, all.'

I dined with the young couple. The Baron was overflowing with happiness and effusive cordiality; he drank my health, and his Amelie's health and his own health. 'Why should I not drink my own health,' he cried, 'when I have the inexpressible happiness of knowing that it is as precious to another as to myself? Is it not precious to you, my Amelie?' And Amelie looking at him answered, 'Yes, my Friedrich, most precious.'

So the Baron, after all, had found the wife of all others best suited to him, a little girl whom he adored and who adored him, who looked up to him indeed, as the

best and wisest of beings. And since to be accounted wise and good not seldom induces wisdom and virtue, I had great hopes of Baron Friedrich in the future. Amelie, as I have said, was charming in appearance, nor lacked either wit or intelligence, I discovered, when she found courage to talk a little. And when after dinner we went into the salon, which we had to ourselves, and her husband asked her to go to the piano, she sat down and sang and played quite delightfully.

The Baron seated himself by me, and presently, whilst his wife played, began to talk about her.

'It is indeed to you, madame,' he said, with real feeling, 'that I owe all my happiness. Without you, I might never have returned to Germany; I might never have seen my Amelie. I might have done I know not what wild thing in that moment of despair.'

'Despair!' I said, smiling, 'your despair did not last very long; that you must allow.'

The Baron was still himself, I found.

'It was a terrible time,' he said, very gravely, shaking his head, 'a terrible time. I do not like to think of it now. But your kindness,' he went on, more lightly, 'I shall never forget. Ah, madame, when I first saw my Amelie come smiling into the room, and knew that this was the wife my father had chosen for me, I felt that fate was indeed kind, that it was relenting towards me at last. Is she not charming?' he went on, 'does she not play divinely? has she not an angel's smile?'

'I think she is altogether charming,' I said sincerely, 'I congratulate you truly, Baron. Take care of your wife, for I feel sure she will make you happy.'

'Happy? I am the most blessed among mortals,' he said, 'and she is happy too.

Oh, I shall make her happy. She thinks too well of me—a great deal too well; but I shall deserve it by devoting to her my entire life.' Then raising his voice 'That is enough, my angel,' he cried, 'you have played enough. You will tire yourself, my Amelie, and we have a journey before us to-morrow. Come and sit here in this corner of the sofa by our good Madame R——.'

They were only passing through Rome, I found, on their way to Naples, and were to leave the next day. I saw them set off the following morning, the Baron shaking hands with me in his effusive way, up to the last moment.

'You are to come and see us in our own home,' he said, holding both my hands in his, 'we shall expect you in the summer. Is not Madame R—— to come, my Amelie, and see us in the summer?'

And Amelie smiling, held out her hand and said, 'Yes, come.'

I was destined to meet one more Sonnenplatz acquaintance in Rome. Two days later I was walking through the gardens of the Villa Borghese. It was a Saturday afternoon, and I had been to see the sculpture galleries. I was walking across the grass, which the spring had strewn with anemones and pale crocuses, when I noticed a young lady just in front of me, engaged apparently in picking flowers. I thought I recognized her sealskin jacket and flowing hair; and when, a moment later, she turned her head, I saw that it was in truth, Miss Vera.

She came towards me at once, her hands full of anemones, and gave me one of her pretty greetings. She looked very blooming, full of health and spirits.

'We have just come from Naples,' she said, in answer to my inquiries. 'Maman

is pretty well, thank you; I have left her there in the carriage, whilst I am come to pick some flowers.'

'Do you make any stay in Rome?' I asked.

'No,' Miss Vera said, 'we are going on at once to Nice. Maman suffers too much from the weather. It is so uncertain in these south Italian towns.'

'You have come, no doubt, to join your father,' I said, remembering what she had told us by the Sonnenplatz watermill.

'No,' she said, 'he is no longer here. Rome does not agree with him. He is now in Paris.'

And that is the last I know of Miss Vera.

AMBROSE MALET.

AMBROSE MALET.

'He past; a soul of nobler tone:
My spirit loved and loves him yet.'
In Memoriam.

This evening, turning over an old portfolio in search of a document, I came upon a note dated some five-and-thirty years back. I had not forgotten its contents, but I had not known that it still existed; and as I glanced at it now, my eyes grew dim with memories.

'Dear Merridew,' it ran, 'Your letter pained me, of course; you meant it to do so, I presume. But it is no matter. You know my philosophy—that the sum of human things comes even in the end.

Once more, you are altogether wrong about Charlotte. I know nothing of her, and had nothing to do with her disappearance. You do not believe me; well, that is no matter either—. I go up by the first train to-morrow, and we shall not meet again. If you care to write, my home address will find me. God bless you, old fellow; you will take my blessing for what you think it worth. 'AMBROSE MALET.'

No, I had not believed him, and I did not write. My eyes grew dim with memories as I laid the note down again and fell into thought. I had but just come from the death-bed of an old parishioner, who had passed away in peace. To parsons, as to doctors, familiarity with death presently begets a certain indifference. But that note recalled a death-bed that must always remain one of the most poignant memories of my life. Yes, until my own hour shall

come, the hour that I can least forget is that which held in it the death of the man who had once been my best friend.

More than thirty years ago, I was making a fortnight's tour in Belgium. I had lately been ordained to a curacy, and was taking my first holiday. I was a fresh-looking young fellow in those days, holding serious views of life; and though young for my years, had the fullest sense of the dignity, no less than the responsibilities, of the sacred profession I had lately entered. My old aunt who lived with me —I had lost both my parents whilst still a child—thought me the best boy in the world, and petted me as though I were a girl. Well, I was conceited and presumptuous, no doubt; something of a prig, too, perhaps, as new-fledged curates are apt to be—I have had plenty of experience with them since then—but not a bad young

fellow on the whole. To do right myself, and to set everybody else right, seemed to me the most important thing in life; and the first part of the proposition, at any rate, is not a bad formula for a man to start with on his life's career.

I set out on my travels alone, and at once plunging into some of the more picturesque Belgian scenery, found myself, on the evening of the third day, supping in the big hotel of a little village lying among hills and woods. I was supping alone, at the end of the long table of an empty *salle-à-manger*. A number of holiday folk from a neighbouring town had come to dine and departed; silence had succeeded their clamour; the room, lighted by a single lamp at my end of the table, seemed abandoned to shadows and moonlight, and to me, when a young man entered, and calling for coffee and cognac, sat down in the circle of light just opposite to me. He

was a man of about thirty, with a pleasant and remarkably clever face; and, presently, falling into conversation with him, I discovered him to be the village doctor. He was a native of the place, able to give me information of which I was in need, concerning the surrounding country; and we were engaged in talking, with my travelling map spread on the table between us, when a waiter entered and addressed a few words to my companion in a low voice.

'Excuse me for a moment,' he said, turning to me courteously, 'there is a sick man upstairs who requires my attendance. I shall not be gone many minutes.'

In less than a quarter-of-an-hour he returned, and sat down opposite to me again; but he did not at once resume our conversation. He sat with his hands clasped behind his head, gazing before him in silence.

'A sad case,' he said at last, letting his

hands fall to his side, 'a life thrown away. A young fellow wounded mortally in a duel, and brought in here, yesterday, to die. All the doctors in Europe could not save him. He won't live through the night.'

'In a duel!' I said, surprised. Such things, so far, had lain outside the range of my experience.

'Yes, with some Frenchman. They came here across the frontier. Such affairs are not uncommon hereabouts; but they rarely terminate fatally. The other fellow has made off: this one, by-the-by, is a countryman of yours. Stay, I have his name somewhere.'

He fumbled in his pocket for a note-book, and abstracting a card, handed it to me across the table. I read the name; I let the card drop.

'Good God!' I said, 'Ambrose Malet.'

'Do you know him?' said the doctor.

'I know the name—it may be another man,' I answered, in profound agitation. 'Is he young—a big, loose-limbed man, with marked features, a big nose, dull brown hair lying straight across his forehead, and the kindest, the most genial smile imaginable?'

'Your description answers in every particular,' said the doctor, 'except, indeed, as regards the smile, which I have not seen. He looks sad enough, poor fellow. He is young: about your own age I should think.' He looked at me with a momentary humorous gleam that seemed to say: 'In all other respects as unlike you as possible.' 'He has grey eyes and wears no beard; on his little finger is a green signet ring. If you are a friend of his, I shall be glad. I asked him to-day if I should send to anyone, and he said that he had no relations, and not a friend in the world that would come to him.'

The tears rushed to my eyes; I could not help it. I rose, and walking to one of the long windows, stood with my back turned to the room, looking out on the moonlit garden.

Three years before, at Oxford, Ambrose Malet had been my best friend. A lonely man, a solitary soul, he had sought me out through one of those contradictions that sometimes provoke and cement the firmest friendships. He was little known personally at Oxford, yet made his mark at once as a man of powers so unusual that everything might be expected of him. The expectation was founded on a misconception of his character; and yet perhaps not. Who shall say? since death came at six-and-twenty to solve the problem after its own fashion. A prodigious and unfailing memory, an almost incredible facility for acquiring and assimilating knowledge, were combined with one of the strangest

and most original minds I have ever come across. He took, without appreciable effort, every honour that Oxford has to offer, and he took them with absolute indifference. Knowledge, and always more of the knowledge that he acquired with such ease, seemed all that he desired. He read for hours, not as the bookworm reads, or the ordinary student; but with a prodigious, a devouring curiosity, an insatiable craving, until in one direction or another he reached the final limit and faced the blank beyond. At such times, as I learned to know, he fell into a despondency that lasted sometimes for days; then, rousing himself, he would start again on some other track, to arrive at the same result. His mind, I say, was one of the strangest and most original I have met with; but it had no impulse, that I ever discovered, towards original creation, little even towards original research.

He had read every poem worth reading in the English language, and knew half of them by heart; but I do not know that he ever wrote a line of poetry. He would take up some branch of science, and devour every book on it he could find; but that done, he made no independent effort towards fresh discovery—he turned to something else. Some spring that moves to practical action, some link common between man and life, was lacking in him; his soul dwelt solitary and apart, thirsting, drinking, insatiable; only demanding incessantly what no man ever yet had—no, nor can have ever until the end of time.

He had few acquaintances at Oxford, and no intimate friend but myself. Sometimes he would come to my rooms and sit silently watching me as I plodded on at my reading. My vocation had early been fixed, and I never wavered in my choice; I had never any idea but that of entering

the Church. Malet would sit smoking and watching me in silence. 'Good old Frank,' he would presently say, with his affectionate smile, and laying a hand on my shoulder as he left the room. Not unfrequently we took long walks together; and by degrees, though he spoke little of his affairs, I learned something of his life. He was a man of small independent fortune —some hundreds a year, I think; he had no relations living but a paralysed and childish old mother, with whom he spent the whole of his vacations, in some remote country spot. He spoke little of himself, and sometimes our walk would begin and end in all but total silence. At other times his flow of conversation was almost unceasing; and I have not yet met the man who can talk as Malet did, when the mood was upon him. I would not, if I could, try to reproduce those talks; what withered and scentless weeds are those

that would fain represent the radiant flowers of last year's garden? He was sometimes gay, more often serious. He was no orthodox believer, and his unorthodoxy shocked me at first; he saw it; and while never hiding his opinions, was careful to avoid shocking me again. But all his views of the conduct of life were simple, pure, and noble; I have never met purer or nobler; and I can trace their effect on my own mind to this day. And yet he had planned no future career; the hopes and ambitions of other men seemed to have no meaning for him. Something, I say, was wanting in him—some link that reconciles common humanity to life, that binds society together, that helps the eternal duty of man to man. A tender heart, an endless craving, a solitary soul; such was Ambrose Malet.

I remember his face raised one winter night to the frozen, starlit sky. 'One

day we shall know,' he said 'yes, we shall know—we shall know.'

'You believe in the immortality of the soul, Ambrose?' I said. 'How do you reconcile that with your other opinions?'

'On no logical grounds,' he answered briefly, and changed the subject.

I have said he had a tender heart; that is to say little. He had a capacity for profound and passionate love. In the course of our rambles, we made the acquaintance—an ordinary young man's adventure—of a farmer's daughter, a young girl, who not without intention, as I had afterwards reason to believe, strongly attracted us both. I was in love; if not for the first time in my life, as much as I had ever been before. But Charlotte Smiles was not a girl I could have made my wife; and I must do myself the justice to say, that recognizing the fact early in our acquaintance, I broke off, with some

resolution, even the semblance of a flirtation. With Malet it was different; he fell deeply and passionately in love with the girl. The difference in station and education seemed not to affect him; it was impossible, indeed, that an intellect such as his could ever look for, or expect the sympathy that springs from equal minds; and on the one occasion on which he spoke to me on the subject—for a reserve had sprung up between us in the matter—I inferred, though he did not state it in so many words, that he hoped to make Charlotte his wife immediately on leaving Oxford. Shortly afterwards, the girl disappeared from her father's home. Certain circumstances threw suspicion on Malet; nothing was, nothing could be, proved against him; but, to tell the story briefly, I thought I had reason to believe the worst, and I believed it. All my incipient love for the girl herself blazed up in a flame of

passion and jealousy, and what I held to be righteous indignation, at the story of her disappearance and of her parents' despair. Malet said very little; he gave me his word that he had had nothing to do in the matter; he saw that I did not believe him, and he said no more. I, on my side, broke with him. He had been my best friend; on more than one occasion he had served me in a way that should have won my undying gratitude. But what gratitude survives a sense of wrong? and, indeed, I held myself not ungrateful, but just. I broke with him; that little note which fell under my hands to-night, was the last I ever received in his writing; it was the last I heard of him until that fatal evening when I learned that, under the same roof with myself, he lay dying among strangers in a strange land.

What storm of memories, old affection, remorse, swept over me matters little now.

Where were doubts and past suspicions? Alas, that living or dying, clearness of vision should come to enlighten us at the supreme moment only. I turned from the window to the doctor.

'Can I see him?' I said; 'he was the best friend I had in the world.'

'Certainly you can see him,' he answered. 'I rejoice, indeed, that you or anyone belonging to him should be here. I will take you to him at once. He has a little fever, but is otherwise quite quiet, no acute suffering, happily. Nothing can harm him now.'

'Do you mean that as a certainty?' I said. 'Forgive me, I have no reason whatever to doubt your capacity, or that you have done everything that is right; on the contrary, you inspire me with confidence. Still, in certain cases, a consultation——'

He shook his head, smiling a little. 'I

lay no claim,' he said, 'to infallibility, and could I see the faintest hope in a possible change of treatment, I should be the first to invite a consultation. But your friend's case is hopeless; the merest tyro in my profession could not fail to see it at once. It is only an unusual strength of constitution that has enabled him to live till now.'

He led the way as he spoke, up flight after flight of the shallow hotel stairs, and down a long passage to a remote and silent part of the house. At the end of the passage a door stood ajar. The doctor paused before we reached it. 'You will wish to remain with your friend?' he said.

'Undoubtedly,' I answered.

He gave me one or two brief directions, then signing to me to wait for a moment, opened the door and went in. The room he entered was so small, that standing there in the doorway, I took it in at a

glance. It was a little wooden room, with brown walls, and a brown uncarpeted floor; fresh, and pleasing in its simplicity. One or two chairs, a table in the window, a smaller one with a lighted candle and some phials, at the head of the bed where my friend was lying, were, with the bed itself, the principal furniture. He was alone. A woman of the village who had attended him during the day was but just gone, and the doctor had undertaken to watch him through the night; but not the less, the silence, the loneliness in which he lay there dying, struck me painfully. He lay with closed eyes, his hands spread out on the counterpane, his head supported by pillows. The night was warm, and though the little casement stood wide open, he seemed oppressed by the heat, and to breathe with difficulty. He was not changed; even in early youth, his features had been too marked to alter readily; only the lines

with which I had been familiar, had deepened, and the pallor of mortal sickness overspread his countenance.

He opened his eyes as the doctor's step approached his bed-side.

'What time is it?' he said, feebly.

'About half-past nine,' said the doctor. He laid his hand on his patient's wrist as he spoke, and stood for a moment noting the pulse. 'There is a friend of yours here,' he said then, 'who wants to see you. I have brought him up.'

His forehead and mouth contracted painfully for a moment. 'A friend of mine?' he said, 'but I have no friends.'

I came forward. His glance fell upon me and was suddenly illuminated. 'Frank!' he cried.

He held out both hands; I grasped them in mine. For a long time we remained motionless. I could not speak; in what words could I address him after my long

silence? And I saw that he was dying.

His hold relaxed at last. The doctor had silently disappeared, and we were alone. It was he who spoke first. 'You never believed me about Charlotte, Frank,' he said, looking at me.

'Don't speak of it,' I cried, 'I know that I was wrong, utterly wrong. I want to tell you that. Never mind the rest.'

'On the contrary, I mind it very much,' he said, in his feeble voice, 'it is a long story, but I must tell it briefly. I suspected at the time who was at the bottom of Charlotte's disappearance, but I could never bring it home to him. I could never come upon a trace of her, until a few weeks ago, when I saw her by chance in Paris——' His voice failed a little through weakness, but in a moment he rallied and went on. 'She was living there with some Frenchman—never mind his name. I hunted her up, and tried to persuade her to go home

to her parents. He resented my interference; we fought—and here I am.'

'It was that!' I cried confounded, 'it was on account of Charlotte.'

'Poor child, poor girl,' he murmured closing his eyes.

I stood speechless for a while. For the first time I realised Malet's part in the duel of which the doctor had spoken. In face of his mortal malady, I had forgotten for the moment that malady's cause.

'Well?' he said at last, as I did not speak.

'Good heavens, Ambrose,' I said, 'you are the last man, yes, the last man in the world, I should have thought would fight a duel.'

He smiled a little.

'Why not,' he said, 'I had no intention of killing the poor wretch who challenged me; he was safe enough from me.'

'But the sin of it——' I began.

'Oh, the sin of it, the sin of it—' he said. 'Sit down, Frank,' he went on, raising his head, and looking at me with a smile by the dim light of the candle. 'So you're a parson now, a priest I suppose you would call yourself, and are going to save men's souls. Well, you'll do a world of good, old fellow, one way or another. I know so much of you.'

His head fell back on the pillow.

'Move the light, will you?' he said, 'there is nothing to do, and it hurts my eyes; we don't need a candle to talk by.'

I rose, and set the candle on a deal table in the passage outside. The door stood ajar; only a thread of light fell through the opening. But though the moon was on the other side of the house, its suffused whiteness filled the room; and through the open casement, its light could be seen falling on a tree-covered hill rising just behind the hotel garden, its summit

defined against the pale summer heavens. I took my place again beside Malet's bed. I could see his face plainly in the twilight as he lay with it turned towards the window, his eyes fixed on the sky. For a long time he was silent; I also did not speak. My heart was weighed down by the sense of our long estrangement; it was breaking at the thought that we should have met only to find him like this. He spoke again, quite suddenly.

'You never believed me about Charlotte,' he said.

'For God's sake, Ambrose,' I cried in anguish, 'don't speak of that again. Forgive me, forgive me! the loss all these years has been mine.'

'No, no,' he said feebly, 'and it is no matter; all is over now, and it is all one. Life too will be over in a few hours, and that is well. Strange,' he went on, after a pause, 'that men should dread death as

they do. I have thought so always; now that I am dying, I think so more than ever. To dread the unknown—when to know the unknowable is the great and unattainable desire of life.'

'Most men think otherwise,' I said, 'the love of life is strong.'

'Yes, yes, I know it,' he said, 'and it is better so; it should be so. But something has gone wrong between me and life; I have felt a stranger in it always. Death is best.'

He lay silent again for a long while. His breathing was difficult and oppressed; but he was suffering no acute pain, he told me; he may even have dozed, as he lay there, his eyes opening and closing from time to time. Now and then the wind stirred the trees on the hill outside, the shadows slowly moved with the advancing night; otherwise all was still. But presently he began to turn restlessly in the bed; his

hands, hot with fever, strayed over the counterpane. When he spoke again, his mind was wandering a little.

'I suppose you go back to Oxford at once, old fellow?' he said. 'I should like to get back there, if it were only for a day. My mother is dead, you know; poor mother. The meadows down by the river—it would be cooler there than here; we might have another walk together. Charlotte—'

The words died away in a murmur; but all at once, half-raising himself in bed: 'No one has believed in me, no one has cared for me,' he said, in a strange loud solemn voice, such as I had never heard him use before, 'and knowledge is ignorance, and one drinks and drinks and the eternal thirst is never quenched, never—'

He looked round wildly, till his eyes falling on me in the imperfect light, gradually full consciousness returned. He lay back quietly.

'Give me some water, will you, Frank?' he said, in an exhausted voice.

I did as he desired. 'I must have been asleep, I think,' he said, as his head sank again on the pillow. 'I should have liked to tell you all about my wanderings, Frank,' he went on presently, 'I have wandered a good deal since we last met; but I suppose there won't be time. What o'clock is it?'

He felt feebly under the pillow for his watch. I went to the door, and looking at my own watch by the candle outside, told him the hour.

'It is later than I thought,' he said, and again lay silent, his face turned to the window. I sat down beside him, and took his hand in mine. He let it lie there. Strange,' he said again, 'one lives alone and one dies alone; and yet human fellowship is sweet. I like to feel your hand in mine, Frank.'

He was growing weaker. I could see it by the way his head lay on the pillow, and by the increasing difficulty with which he swallowed the cordial I gave him from time to time. I asked him presently whether he had any wishes I could fulfil.

'No,' he said at first; then—'Bury me here, of course,' he said; 'one spot of earth is like another, and there is no one at home to mourn for me.'

'Don't say that,' I said, 'I——' I broke down, and laying my head on the counterpane, cried like a girl. It distressed him.

'Don't,' he said twice; and in a minute I conquered the weakness. 'I have longed for death,' he said, 'and now it has come. Yes, I am glad to die. Something was wrong between me and life; I could have made nothing of it. Death is best and what comes after.'

'You do believe, Ambrose?' I cried. The words were involuntary; for though the thought had been in my mind since I entered the room, I had not meant to utter it. He looked at me with eyes whose kindness and affection I can never forget.

'Good old Frank!' he said. 'If you ever see Charlotte,' he went on, after a pause, 'tell her from me to go back to her parents. I have written to them; she will have no difficulty. Tell her so from me.'

The room was growing darker; the moon had set. I could not make out the changes in his face any more. But he still kept it turned towards the window. 'How bright the stars are to-night,' he said once. 'Surely we shall know.' And once again: 'Soon I shall know.' Then a long silence.

About midnight the doctor had come in, had laid his hand on his patient's pulse, and gone without a word. I brought the

light back into the room in the darkest hour before dawn; but Ambrose took no notice. About dawn he died.

An hour later I went through the front door of the hotel, and out into the court-yard to breathe the morning air. The night had been a terrible one to me; I did not, until afterwards, know how terrible and poignant. No, only in after-years I came to understand what scales of self-sufficiency had fallen from my eyes, and that, from that day forward, I was a changed man. I went out into the courtyard, looking up at the morning sky, which had the pathos of the light that first dawns after one whom we love has died. The day would clear into brightness later on; but at that early hour everything was grey and misty; low vapours veiled the hills, a long line of mist marked the course of the little stream through the valley. As I crossed the

courtyard on my way to the gates that shut it in from the road, one of them was pushed back, and a woman came towards me. She wore a veil that concealed her face; but, seeing me, she started, and by a sudden impulse, I suppose, threw it back. Then I saw who she was.

'Charlotte!' I said.

The blood rushed to her face, then forsook it. It was a lovely face still, though strangely altered since I had seen it last. She stared at me uncertainly for a moment.

'I didn't expect to meet you, sir,' she said at last. 'I came to ask after Mr. Malet. Can you tell me how he is?'

'He is dead,' I answered.

She gave a cry, and dropped down on a bench by which we were standing. For a long time she did not say a word, nor after that cry utter a sound. She sat with her hands clasped round her knees, gazing

fixedly before her. A look of indescribable dreariness, rather than of grief, gradually overspread her face. As for me, who shall say what emotions I felt? I had once loved the girl—yes, I had loved her; and up in yonder room lay the man whose death she had caused.

At last she spoke. 'I wanted to see Mr. Malet again,' she said, without looking up. 'I followed them; they didn't know it. Can't I see him now?'

She rose as she spoke; but before I could answer, dropped on to the seat again.

'No, I couldn't,' she said. 'I never saw anyone dead yet. I couldn't go.'

'Charlotte,' I said, 'Mr. Malet left a message for you. He bade me entreat you to go back to your parents. He had written to them, he said. You will have no difficulty with them.'

Again she sat silent, gazing before her.

'Mr. Malet said the same to me,' she said at last. 'Of course he couldn't understand. It's not only father and mother, it's—no, I shall never go home again—never!'

She rose as she spoke, pulling down her veil, and drawing her cloak tightly round her against the chill morning air. I made one more effort, though what it cost me, I could not say. It was a moment surely for angels' tongues to plead; and on my tongue the words seemed to weigh like lead.

'Charlotte,' I said, 'surely Mr. Malet's wish——'

'Don't!' she said, very sharply, turning from me.

'Promise me, at least,' I said, laying a detaining hand on her shoulder, 'that for his sake, as for your own, your life shall henceforward be different.'

She turned, and seizing my hand, without looking at me, wrung it.

'Good-bye, Mr. Merridew,' she said; and turning from me once more, hurried to the gate. Outside, for one moment, she paused; her back was towards me, but I saw her shoulders move as with a sob. The next moment she had disappeared in the mist.

Whither did she go? Alas, I have never known. But visiting in after years Ambrose Malet's grave, I found laid on it a fresh wreath of immortelles. A stranger had passed and left it there, I was told.

THE STORY OF A GODDAUGHTER.

THE STORY OF A GODDAUGHTER.

'. . . . . Through the Stone
Forthwith slid warmth like spring through sapling stems,
And lo, the eyelid stirred, beneath had grown
The tremulous light of life—'

WILLIAM BELL SCOTT.

CHAPTER I.

'I NEVER had but one goddaughter,' said Dr. Somers, 'and she was something out of the common, I can tell you. No, a dozen ordinary goddaughters could not have caused me the trouble and anxiety I went through at one time on her account. Yes, yes, I can assure you that she was something out of the common altogether.'

He leaned back in his chair as he spoke, slowly stirring a cup of coffee that his niece had just poured out and given him. I had been dining with Dr. Somers, an old

college friend of whom I had lost sight for many years. He was an erect, rather stout man, of middle height, with black eyebrows and white hair, a shrewd and humorous glance, firm-set lips, brisk movements, and a neat clerical attire of somewhat old-fashioned cut. A scholar and a man of the world, he was nevertheless a Church of England parson of the old type to the backbone. A great part of his life had been spent in going from one place to another. In his youth a love of movement, of adventure, perhaps, had led him to accept a military chaplaincy in preference to a family living; and when ill-health compelled him for some years to resign his clerical duties, he employed his time in travelling in Greece and Italy. He never married, and at upwards of sixty years of age, drifted into a leisurely and learned seclusion as rector of a small parish near the cathedral town of B——, with

a widowed niece to live with him; a charming and cultivated woman, who together with my old friend, made his house one of the most agreeable to be found in B—— or its neighbourhood. I had been dining with him in company with two or three other guests on the evening when the above remark was make. Some ladies were of the party; their curiosity was aroused; and at the request of one of them Dr. Somers related the following history.

'I never had but one goddaughter,' he said, 'her name was Elisabeth St. Just. Her mother was a Swede, a woman of good family and of great beauty as I have been given to understand; I never saw her. Her father I never saw either till within a week of his death, when we encountered each other at a remote hill station in India. He was in the army, a man who had already made his mark, and promised to do

a good deal in the future. When I first met him, however, he was out of his mind nearly with trouble and grief; his little girl was a month old, and his wife had been dead a week. Though I had never happened to meet him before—he was a much younger man than myself—I had been well acquainted with his family in England; and under the circumstances, I had no hesitation in making myself known to him and offering any service that lay within my power. He recollected my name, and asked me to be godfather to the infant; she was to be christened the next day and sent off at once to Europe under the care of an officer's wife who was taking her own child to England. I consented; the child was baptised; and three days later the father was dead also, dead of the cholera which broke out suddenly in the station, and to which his distress of mind no doubt predisposed him.

From that day I never saw my goddaughter again till she was twenty-one years of age. I heard of her from time to time; I knew that she had been in the first instance placed in the charge of her father's mother, Lady Margaret St. Just, with whom she lived until she was seven or eight years old, that she had then for some reason been transferred to the care of her mother's relations in Sweden, and that she passed the next twelve years of her life with them at Stockholm and elsewhere. At the time, however—some ten years ago now—that I renewed my acquaintance with her, she was once more living with her English grandmother, Lady Margaret St. Just. I had been spending the winter in Italy, and was actually at Naples, when I heard that Lady Margaret and her granddaughter were established for some weeks in Florence. It was the first time that Elisabeth had been within my reach, so to speak; and

though she was now past the age over which a godfather's duties are supposed to extend, conscience began to reproach me a little for the perfunctory way in which those duties had been performed. The girl might have been brought up a heathen for anything I knew to the contrary; though I had, in fact, taken care to endow her with a handsome prayer-book and bible, and so on, by way of reminding her that she was a Christian. It is true that one cannot very well hear a child say its Catechism when one is on the opposite side of the globe; and her temporal welfare was her guardians' affair, not mine. Nevertheless, I felt that when a girl has a parson for a godfather, she has a right to expect, at the very least, a little extra good advice, and that the expectation should not be disappointed. Finally, I made up my mind to go to Florence, see what my goddaughter was like, and so far as might be,

make up for the time that had been lost.

There are few places I am more at home in than Florence, or that I have oftener visited and re-visited in the course of my wanderings. I took care to secure beforehand a small apartment I had the habit of occupying in one of the Lung'Arno hotels, and immediately on my arrival I settled myself in it, with the intention of staying for a month or more. I arrived on a certain spring evening towards the middle of April; and in the course of the following morning I went to the Uffizi, the place I usually visit first on a return to Florence. It holds to my mind a sort of quintessence of the best and most classical Florentine tradition; and nowhere else can I revive with such certainty the freshness of those first impressions that give the liveliest charm, the most endearing memories to every spot one visits. I spent an hour or

more among the drawings and engravings, then turned into the Tribune and the adjoining rooms to take a glance at certain old favourites before leaving the gallery. I had made my way into the furthest room of the Tuscan school, and was looking at the charming Madonna and child by Filippo Lippi, which is one of its chief attractions, when my attention was caught by a copy standing on an easel in front of the picture. Naturally I avoid looking at copies, as a rule; for few trades can be worse executed than that of the picture-copying in the Florentine galleries. Here, however, as I at once perceived, was a copy altogether different from the usual crude-coloured daub. The artist had not only made an exact fac-simile in drawing and colour of the picture before him, a sufficiently rare accomplishment in itself, but he had caught the very spirit and sentiment of the slender Madonna and child, and

attendant boy-angels. It was less a copy than a reproduction. The work seemed finished and the painter was absent, so that I could contemplate it at my leisure; but the painting tools still lay about, and in a minute a young man came up to the picture, and as I moved on one side, took up a brush and stood gazing alternately at the original and at the copy, in a way that assured me that I had the artist in person before me. I turned my attention from his work to himself.

He was an Italian, and an extraordinarily handsome young man, one of those youths who, gathering in themselves some of the best characteristics of their race, become typical of the beauty of a whole nation. His complexion was pale and clear, his features almost faultless, the nose slightly aquiline, the mouth and chin of classical beauty; his hair was black and wavy, and the heavy lidded-eyes which he

presently turned on me, were not only admirable in shape, but startling by their light and flash and depth of colour. He wore an old painting coat, and was dressed otherwise rather shabbily; neither in costume nor in manner did he betray the slightest shade of vanity or of self-consciousness. When his eyes met mine, I addressed him.

'If the admiration of a stranger may be allowed,' I said, 'you will perhaps permit me to express mine for this copy that you have just finished. I never saw anything of the kind more perfectly executed.'

He smiled with the charming Italian smile that lights up the plainest and most sullen face to beauty.

'Oh,' he said, 'a copy is no great matter. One must be a fool to fail in painting what is set there, before one's eyes. A correct eye and a sure hand are all that is needed.'

'Pardon me,' I said, 'what one might call a sympathetic admiration is needed also to reproduce the work of a great master; and to judge from the copies one generally sees, all these requisites are entirely wanting.'

He shrugged his shoulders good-humouredly. 'It may be so,' he said, 'at any rate I am delighted that my work, such as it is, should have met with your approbation.'

He began putting up his brushes preparatory to leaving. It so happened that one of the things I had proposed to do in Florence was to find, if such could be found, a good copy of a good picture. Past experience had not taught me to be sanguine in the matter; but here apparently might be my man. I felt some delicacy, however, in asking him whether his picture were for sale, and was considering how I might introduce the question when he

himself relieved me from my difficulty.

'I shall begin to believe in my good luck,' he said, smiling again, as he lifted the picture from the easel, 'only yesterday a lady passing through the gallery, saw this copy and bought it of me at once. Now it has found a second admirer.'

'Only I am too late,' I said. 'I could have wished to arrive the day before instead of the day after your purchaser. You have not, I suppose, a second copy?'

He shook his head. 'Not of this,' he answered, 'I never copy a picture twice if I can help it. I can't do it decently the second time; it bores me to death. But if you cared to come with me to my studio I have copies there of other pictures, and you might find something to suit you. It's close by here in the Corso.'

I consented willingly; the young fellow packed up his painting gear, and we started together. It was not ten minutes' walk to

his place, and yet in that time he had managed to tell me a good deal of his history. There was a sort of expansive simplicity and openness in his manner and conversation that took my fancy greatly. He was a Neapolitan by birth, I learnt, and his name was Dino Morelli. He had been educated for a priest, but as the final moment approached had discovered two or three things which appeared to him, and not without reason, to interfere with such a vocation: first, that he was a thorough sceptic, and had no beliefs to speak of but a belief in humanity and in Italia Irredenta: secondly, that he cared for no occupation but that of painting—a fact he was disposed to regret, since Italy and the Italians, he considered, had something better to think of in these days than art; but so it was: thirdly, that there was nothing in a priest's life in general or in particular that he did not cordially

detest. Under these circumstances he had left his home where such sentiments would have met with little sympathy, and betaken himself to Florence. He had been there nearly a year, and had so far achieved no particular success; on the other hand, he occasionally sold something to a foreigner, and having enough to live on, felt encouraged to persevere. He was still talking as we ascended flight after flight of stairs in a lofty house in the old Corso, and finally paused before a door on the topmost landing.

'I haven't much of a place,' he said, putting his key into the lock, 'but it's cheap, and there's a north light, and I like the look-out, though it's not the best in the world for painting. I shall have to change by-and-by, I suppose.'

He opened the door, and I found myself in a large, rather bare apartment with a bed in one corner, two or three easels, and

a number of canvases leaning against the wall. Some pots of carnations in the window were the only attempt at decoration; but immediately beyond, separated from us only by some tiled roofs, rose the vast marble wall of the Duomo, its austere lines of dusky green and mellowed white filling and satisfying the eye with a sense of antique dignity and beauty such as no other background in Florence could have afforded. I envied the young fellow his apartment, and told him so. 'You are back in the Middle Ages here,' I said.

'Oh, I don't care about the Middle Ages,' he answered, with a laugh, 'but the room is quiet, and I like the look-out on the Duomo, whenever it was built. That great wall of marble reflects the sunlight though, and interferes, I think, with my painting when I work at home. I shall have to change my quarters, I believe.'

He set up half-a-dozen canvases on the

easels as he spoke, and while I looked at them, he took off his painting-coat, and retiring to a corner of the room, began to perform a brief toilette. 'Excuse my want of ceremony,' he said, coming back to me, thrusting his arms into another coat, 'but I have to go out again almost immediately, and have no time to lose. Do you see anything there that you fancy?'

The copies—they were all copies that he had shown me—were admirable. I presently selected one, which he put aside, saying he would go with me the following day to a framemaker's to select a frame.

'Have you no original work?' I inquired, looking round.

'Not much,' he said. 'I hope, of course, to paint my own pictures some day, but so far I've had neither time nor money to study a great deal. I make sketches of one thing and another, and

leave them to be worked out in the future.'

He took up some smaller canvases on which rough sketches were dashed in with oil-colours, and placed them one by one before me. They showed some talent and power, if no great invention or originality of treatment. One or two—and these were the least pleasing—were in the crude realistic style which certain Italian artists affect in painting subjects of the present day; others in manner and composition showed unmistakable signs of the influence copying from the old masters had had upon him.

'You are like some of our English painters,' I said to him at last, 'and have let Botticelli take hold of you a good deal, I see. That sort of thing is in the air, no doubt. These sketches are allegorical, I presume? May I ask what they represent?'

The young Italian looked over my shoulder. 'Those?' he said. 'Oh, those

are two of a series I proposed painting to illustrate the passions. They are intended to represent Love and Revenge.'

I considered the sketches again with some attention. The central figure in each, against a background of trees, a loggia, a Renaissance frieze and so on, was a woman in a dress of fantastic cut, which in its particular arrangement of clinging folds and girdled draperies and puffings, recalled, as I had said, the art of Botticelli. One, amidst an appropriate surrounding of flowers and birds and winged loves, held a fillet raised to the level of the eyes, as though in the act of bandaging or unbandaging them; the other had with the left hand just removed a mask, whilst the right was hidden in her bosom. But in either sketch the woman's face was left a blank.

'How is this?' I said. 'Neither Love nor Revenge has presented itself to

you yet apparently, or why is your central figure left unfinished?'

'Oh, that is nothing,' he answered. 'I did those some time ago. I think of repainting the subjects in modern dress, and then I shall put in the faces. Love and revenge belong to this age as much as to any other.'

'Ah, you think so, do you?' I said, looking at his handsome, brilliant young face, which seemed as though it might undoubtedly have a good deal to do with love.

'At any rate, I hope so,' he answered, 'they are the only two passions worth living for.'

He took up a piece of red chalk, and began rapidly sketching in the face of the figure he called Love; but the next instant he effaced it.

'They are the only two passions,' he said again, removing the sketches from the

easel and replacing them with their face to the wall, 'that I can conceive of as thoroughly satisfying a man. Either of them alone would be worth living for.'

'So,' I cried, 'here is a young fellow who tells me that he cares for nothing, and believes in nothing but modern life and young Italy, with steam and commerce and the rest of it; and yet here he is uttering sentiments that might have come straight out of an old melodrama or one of our Mrs. Radcliffe's romances.'

'Oh,' he said, laughing, and with a charming air of easy indifference, 'we are all young Italy of course, but there is some of the old leaven left in us yet, I fancy.'

He looked at his watch as he spoke. I perceived he was in haste to be gone, though courtesy withheld him from saying so; and concluding that he had some engagement, I bade him farewell, appointing an hour when we might meet the follow-

ing day at a framemaker's whose address he gave me.

'I will accompany you downstairs,' he said, 'perhaps our roads lie in the same direction. I am going towards the Via Tornabuoni.'

'And I to my hotel on the Lung' Arno,' I answered, 'we can go part of the way together.'

He assented, and allowing my companion to lead the way I accompanied him along the narrow pavement of the Corso, through the old market, to the corner of the Via Tornabuoni by the Strozzi Palace. Here he paused for a moment, contemplating with attention the fragrant and many-hued piles of flowers that bloomed along the old stone slab and against the walls of the palace. Presently he selected a bunch of pansies intense in colour, and peculiar through their size and singular markings; and paying his soldi, he pro-

ceeded with them in his hand down the Via Tornabuoni and along the Arno. I still accompanied him, my hotel lying somewhat lower down the river, and we walked on side by side, talking as though we were old friends, rather than the acquaintance of an hour. The young fellow's open easy manner had a particular attraction for me; and the entire absence of conceit or self-consciousness in a lad so handsome that he might have been forgiven both, won my heart. We walked on past the mosaic and jewellers' shops on the quay below the Santa Trinità; but presently by the Ponte alla Carraja he paused, just at the point where the little piazza opening on to the bridge affords a lounging-place for idlers every fine afternoon throughout the winter and spring. He was discoursing to me with much animation on certain old frescoes that had lately been rescued from whitewash and

which he hoped to get a commission to copy; and without reflecting on the matter, when he stopped, I stopped also. A number of people were lingering as usual about the corner where the parapet of the bridge makes an angle with the parapet dividing the river and the road; there was a good deal of noise going on about us; carriages passing, vendors of beans and cakes shouting their wares on one side and the other, orange barrows with their intermittent cry for custom not half-a-dozen yards off. I had to strain my attention to catch the young Italian's words, and was beginning to wonder why he had elected to stand at this noisy corner, when he broke off abruptly, turning his head in the direction of the Cascine.

In a moment I saw that his eyes were fixed on a carriage that was approaching, driven rather slowly, and occupied by two ladies; one, apparently

old and feeble, was leaning back, wrapped in furs though the day was mild and sunny, her face almost hidden by the veils and laces of her bonnet; the other, a young girl, sat erect, her hands folded before her in her lap, her face shaded by a wide black hat that coming low on her forehead concealed the upper part of her countenance, but left visible a delicately moulded cheek and chin and a shining mass of very pale straw-coloured hair. As the carriage drew near the spot where we were standing, young Morelli stepped forward; and as it passed, with a dexterous movement that seemed to argue some previous practice, he threw the bunch of pansies he had bought but now into the young girl's lap, so that they alighted almost within her hands. The carriage passed on, and the flowers lay as they had been thrown: neither sign nor movement, that I could perceive, recognized their presence either for

rejection or acceptance; they might have been the votive offering to a marble goddess. It passed, and the young fellow's flaming eyes followed it till it was out of sight. Then he turned to me, still standing at his elbow, and looked at me as though unconscious of my presence.

'Those are friends of yours—' I began, with a certain indiscretion, perhaps: but he was staring so oddly, that I wanted to recall him to his senses.

'I beg your pardon—no, I never spoke to them in my life,' he said, rather vaguely, 'I hardly even know their name.' Then waking up, he raised his hat courteously. 'I beg your pardon,' he said again, with his frequent smile, 'I am detaining you here when you were on your way to your hotel. Till to-morrow then—we meet at the framemaker's.'

He strode off, and some comments from the idlers standing about instructed me

that this was not the first time he had been seen on the same spot bent on the same errand. I, for my part, pursued my way to my hotel, filled with no slight amazement at the audacity of a youth in flinging flowers to a lady unknown to him on a road so public as the Lung' Arno. But while I could not approve, I own that I was interested and entertained. I have a fancy for adventures, even a taste for romance; and the prosaic attitude in which young people for the most part confront life in these days, always strikes me as singularly unattractive. This young fellow struck me as an odd mixture too, of the old-world traditions of Italian life in which my generation still believed in its youth, and the positive and matter-of-fact spirit that animates young Italy. Yes, he entertained me—and I little dreamed what sort of entertainment he was to afford me before I had done with him.

CHAPTER II.

My hotel lay at no great distance from that in which Lady Margaret St. Just and her granddaughter were staying; and about an hour after I had parted with young Morelli, I was shown into the private sitting-room of the apartment they occupied on the first floor. It had a south aspect and looked out upon the Arno; but I found on entering that the green outside blinds were closed, shutting out the afternoon sun and creating a twilight for the old lady who sat knitting by a small wood-fire, and who held out a welcoming hand as I followed the servant and my card into the room.

When I was a lad of seventeen and Lady Margaret some ten years older, I had worshipped her with that ardent adoration which most boys offer at least once in their life to a woman older than themselves. That she was already married made no difference to me at all. I compared myself, I remember, to Petrarch, and imagining the idea to be original, never dreamed that my sentiments could change. Nor in one sense did they change; for as I believed then, so I continued to the last day of her life to believe, that there never moved on earth a sweeter and purer-minded lady, nor one more worthy of the worship of old and young than Lady Margaret St. Just. I saw much of her in after years, and found her always the same, too simple ever to grow worldly, too trusting ever to grow bitter; not clever in the ordinary sense of the word, but developing and ripening in gentle wisdom through years

of experience and trouble. Some weaknesses she had: an ineradicable faith in the goodness and good intentions of those about her, which was of necessity imposed upon from time to time; a belief in birth and caste, natural to the station in which she was born and the surroundings among which she grew up; but a belief that inevitably narrowed her conception of life and its relations. The daughter of an old Scotch family, she believed, I think, that no rank, no station that the world presents could surpass, or perhaps even equal her own. She accepted the dignity of her condition humbly, as bestowed by the grace of God; she never spoke of it, there was not one grain of arrogance in her nature; but not the less she regarded it as a special gift from heaven, to be cherished as such by herself and all belonging to her, one which could not be neglected or ignored without

sin. The type was a common one formerly, and has by no means yet vanished from a democratic world. It never showed itself informed with more sweetness and grace, with more consideration for others, than in my old friend, Lady Margaret St. Just.

During my early manhood, I saw, as I have said, a good deal of her; later, when I wandered out into the world, we met at longer and longer intervals; now, through one cause and another, it was nearly twenty years since we had seen each other. At our age, however, twenty years roll themselves up into a very small space; and except for the change in each of us, I could have imagined that not a quarter of that time had elapsed since our last meeting. She was very much changed. She had been one of those women who retain a look of youth far into middle life, and when I last saw

her still kept much of the charm and grace of her younger years, in her slender erect figure, in a still unfaded touch of bloom on her cheeks, in the brightness of her fair hair. Now I found quite an old woman; she had suffered greatly from illness and family sorrow; her eyesight, too, was failing very much, and together with her frail health compelled her to lead an invalid life of almost complete inaction. She was older now at seventy-two than many women ten years her senior; but nothing could change the intrinsic sweetness of her face, or the impression of delicate fairness that had always characterized her, the impression given by a guileless heart.

She held out a welcoming hand as I entered. 'This is an unexpected pleasure, Dr. Somers,' she said, 'and a very great one. To see an old friend again at my age is to reclaim a fragment out of the past. But

in our case the past is too much past. We must manage better for the future, and agree to meet somewhat oftener than every twenty years or so.'

She smiled as she spoke. 'Sit down,' she said, 'and give an old woman the pleasure of hearing all your adventures in all this long time. You were always fond of adventures, you know; you might have been a bishop—nay, an archbishop otherwise by this time. But perhaps you prefer to be as you are; and so do I. I am too old to care for change, and would rather that my friends should remain as nearly as possible what I have always known them.'

I sat down as she desired, and we fell into a long conversation, presently passing from what she was pleased to call my adventures, which indeed made no great figure in a narrative—it would have given me small pleasure that they should —to her own life and its sorrows. They

had been such as naturally fall upon the member of a large family as life advances, and have no place in this story of my goddaughter.

'And now, after all my troubles,' Lady Margaret concluded, 'one great blessing has come to brighten my old age. You know, of course, Dr. Somers, that my granddaughter has come back to live with me?'

'I do indeed,' I answered, 'your granddaughter and my goddaughter, Lady Margaret. Tell me what she is like. I take a very great interest in her, though I have been rather remiss, I fear, in the fulfilment of my special duties. I have never seen her, you know, since she was a month old.'

'Ah, that is what I have sometimes felt myself,' said Lady Margaret, sighing, 'that I ought to have done more, I mean, for my only grandchild. She had grown from

a child into a woman during the years that we were parted. But what could I do, Dr. Somers? I had other and imperative duties that demanded my attention, and would have prevented my giving her all the care she required; and then her mother's relations had undoubtedly a claim upon her. But it was a great trouble to me to be obliged to give her up and let her be educated out of England.'

'But now you have her back again,' I said, 'she is, I trust, all that you could desire.'

'Indeed she is,' said Lady Margaret, warmly, 'I could never tell you all her goodness to me, how she drives with me, and reads to me, and sits with me hour after hour in this dull room; how sweet and unruffled her temper is in all the *contretemps* that must arise in travelling with an infirm old woman like myself. Yes, indeed; it is a joy to me

every morning when I wake to think my child has come back to me, and I thank God for it every night. I cannot see her face very plainly—my sight has failed me very much this last year or two, Dr. Somers—but I see enough to show me that she is like all our family. I am told that she also resembles her mother who was a very beautiful young creature, though she had a strange reserved temper, and I never got to know her thoroughly. But though my sight is too dim for me to judge of shades of likeness, I should imagine Elisabeth to be less beautiful than her mother.'

'And in other matters,' I inquired, 'does she resemble her?'

Lady Margaret hesitated a little.

'Perhaps,' she said. 'Yes, there is something, I sometimes fancy, a little strange and reserved about Elisabeth, that reminds me of her mother; but it may be

only fancy. She has been with me so short a time, I cannot expect her to care for me yet, as she might have done had we been more together; and I love her so dearly, that I feel all that will come right eventually. It is a dull life too, for a young girl, for I can see very little society just now; and though she is quite sweet and good about it, and never expresses any wish for a change, I think it may perhaps depress her a little and make her seem more reserved and indifferent than she would be otherwise. She is extremely quiet, and employs a good part of her time in working for the poor. Yet she strikes me, from one or two things I have heard her say, to have some singular notions concerning life and its duties. That, however, I attribute to the influence of two aunts, her mother's sisters, with whom she has lived at Stockholm during the last six years, and who, as I have since learnt,

belong to some small and very exclusive religious sect holding certain mystical, high-flown doctrines, which I don't suppose I should understand, Dr. Somers, even if I heard what they were. Had I known that Elisabeth was exposed to this sort of influence, I should have exerted myself sooner, I think, to effect her return to England. But her mother's family is in the first society in Stockholm, and I never doubted that all was well in that respect.'

'Do you mean,' I said, 'that she holds heterodox opinions?'

'Not at all, oh, not at all,' said Lady Margaret shocked, 'she has the highest sense of duty, the most earnest desire to do what is right; and she always goes to our English church on Sunday. Oh, such a thing is not to be imagined for a moment. I stipulated you know, when she first went to Sweden, that she should have an English governess whom I myself selected, with

sound Episcopalian views, and no difficulty was made about that. Still, Elisabeth does say strange things occasionally. She is romantic, I suppose; all girls have a little romance in them, and are none the worse for it, I think.'

She ended with a smile. 'How I run on about Elisabeth,' she said. 'This is what it is to be a hen with one chicken again at my age. I never made half so much fuss about her father. And now, Dr. Somers, if you would like to see your goddaughter, I will ring and ask if she has come in; she went out for half-an-hour with her maid, but she has returned I expect, by this time. And then I shall ask you to excuse me if I leave you; for if I do not get my usual nap before dinner, I shall be fit for little this evening or to-morrow either.'

She rang and enquired for Miss St. Just, and presently I found myself alone

in the little salon, awaiting the appearance of my goddaughter. Some few minutes elapsed with no interruption but from the entrance of a servant, who throwing back the Venetian shutters, admitted a warm glow of afternoon light into the room; and as I waited, I began to grieve over the change in my old friend, her dimmed eyes, her feeble gait, the slight tremble that made itself heard in her voice from time to time. Everything in her was changed but her gentle and guileless soul. With all my heart I hoped that Elisabeth was worthy of the love and confidence so freely given her. I had no cause for doubt; and yet, knowing the sweet liberality of the nature that bestowed that love, I found myself doubting.

I was still occupied with these thoughts, when the door opened and my goddaughter entered, advancing towards me with a quiet step. She was rather above the

middle height, erect and slender, as it befits young girls to be, pale and extremely fair of complexion, with hair of almost colourless gold fastened in a knot behind her well-shaped head; her forehead was wide, her lips rather full, the contour of her face too thin for positive beauty, her eyes blue-grey, with lashes and eyebrows dark enough to produce by contrast an impression of dazzling fairness instead of insipid pallor. Her dress of some black woollen material was rigid in fashion almost as a nun's, being made apparently with the utmost simplicity that custom allows. Without being handsome, or absolutely beautiful, my goddaughter was yet of striking appearance, both through her extreme fairness and through something strange in her face that I at once noticed, but could not immediately define. Presently I discovered it to be a singular immobility of expression. The trifling, almost imperceptible

changes that give charm and animation to a countenance, the lifting of an eyebrow, the fall of an eyelid, the slight play of the lips, the momentary glance were wanting. She looked straight before her with an air of intense and absorbed seriousness; in her eyes was the far-off look of an enthusiast or a dreamer. Her voice in speaking was low, but unvarying as her countenance; she answered promptly, gently and intelligently when addressed; it needed indeed but a glance at her face to show that it was no lack of intellect that made her unresponsive in manner and appearance. Either, I conjectured, she might be of a nature too cold for impulse; or she might be possessed by one of those gigantic egotisms that now and then render young people altogether indifferent to the external world except as it touches that point in their personality that absorbs their own attention. And yet her austere garb argu-

ed to my inexperienced eyes, an indifference to self, an absence of vanity inconsistent with my theory of an absorbing self-consciousness. Plainly fashioned as I have said, her dress was without ornament, its blackness relieved only by a narrow white line at her throat and wrists. I am wrong; fastened below her neck-frill, she wore a vivid bunch of pansies; and it was with a singular emotion that I recognised, or thought I recognised in these, the same pansies that I had seen bought some two hours before at the corner of the Strozzi Palace.

Yes, my goddaughter struck me as an enigma; and an enigma that I deemed it lay within my business to solve if possible.

She responded by a faint smile to my words of greeting, into which I threw as much warmth and geniality as I could muster; and presently we fell to talking,

a conversation in which the talk at first was mostly on my side. I wanted to gain some notion of her character, to learn something of her tastes and her ideas; and I began with such trivial inquiries as occurred to me concerning her life in Florence, her amusements and occupations. She had seen all the sights, she said; she had visited all the churches and galleries. She did not go anywhere now; she did not care about pictures or art of any kind; she had gone because her grandmother wished it.

'And do you always do what your grandmother wishes?' I said.

'I try to,' she answered gently, 'I think it right.'

'Well, I am glad to hear you say so,' I said, 'I am glad to hear you say so, my dear. It is not every young girl who would profess as much, or at least act up to it.'

She turned her eyes on me for the first time during our interview, then looked away again at the window. 'I mean, of course,' she said, 'only if it should not interfere with anything more important.'

I waived for a moment the question as to what she considered more important and went on with my examination, which became more serious as we proceeded. She did not greatly care for books, she said; occasionally she liked to read: some biographies—rather vaguely—some history; sometimes—more vaguely still—some poetry. Not novels; those she never read; they did not interest her.

'Why not, my dear?' I inquired, 'most young people of your age love novels. They try to read their own future in them.'

'I think life is very different from any novel I ever looked into,' she said, 'that is why I do not read them any more.'

'And what is your idea of life?' I said.

'I have not lived yet,' she answered, in her impassive tones; 'but I think it must be more sublime and beautiful than anything that can be imagined.'

Her answer took me by surprise. This then was what her grandmother meant by saying that she was romantic. 'No, no,' my poor child,' I murmured, 'you have not lived yet.' Then aloud, 'You don't care for art, and you care for only a few books; what then, to go on with our catechism,—by-the-by, as your godfather, I ought to have asked you before now, I suppose, whether you know your Church Catechism.'

She turned her serious gaze again on me for a moment 'Of course I know it,' she answered. 'I learnt it when I was a child; I have not forgotten it.'

'And believe every word of it, I hope, as my goddaughter should,' I said, 'no

independent views on the Church Catechism, I trust.'

'I believe it,' she answered, 'I have always been taught to do so. But it does not seem to me very important.'

'Oh, oh,' I cried, 'here is an answer to make to a godfather and a parson to boot. The Church Catechism not important! And why not, if I may inquire?'

She hesitated a moment before answering. 'There is so much in life that it has nothing to do with,' she said then.

'Why, how is that?' I said, 'I should have thought it had everything to do with life. It teaches you how to do your duty, and to be a Christian; what more can a good girl like you want? Come, I should like really to know what your idea of life is, that neither novels nor the Church Catechism have anything to do with.'

She sat silent for a minute, her strange eyes fixed as they had been during almost

the whole of our conversation on the space of blue sky seen through the window. 'Why do you ask?' she said coldly. Then without waiting for an answer, 'I think,' she said, 'life means a union of souls.'

'Good,' I said, 'that is a very pretty theory. What does it mean in practice, my dear?'

She did not seem to notice my rallying tone. She looked down at her hands that lay folded before her in her lap, and answered slowly and deliberately.

'I think,' she said, 'that for every human soul there exists another soul in the world fitted to respond to it in every way; that when that other soul is found, then true life begins, because without it each one is incomplete, and all one's capabilities for goodness and passion and love remain undeveloped. That is why I believe life to be so sublime and beautiful; it is the result of the union of the highest

capabilities in every direction of two human beings.'

'Good,' I said again. 'And where did you learn all this, my dear? For you are quite right; it is not in the Church Catechism.'

'I did not learn it at all,' she answered, without moving; 'there are things that one knows without learning; and apart from this, I cannot conceive how life should have any meaning.'

'And you yourself—' I said, after a pause. I hardly knew how to frame my question. 'When life begins, as you term it, for you,' I said, 'what do you expect it to be?'

A flame shot into her eyes, but it passed, and she spoke as impassively as before. 'Nothing can be so beautiful as life,' she answered; 'I said so just now.'

'And this other soul—' I said, and paused again. 'You expect to find it?'

'Perhaps,' she said, rising, as though to end the interview. I rose also, not sorry to bring the conversation to a close; it embarrassed me, I own. Yes, old man though I was, and impassive as Elisabeth showed herself, I found in all this talk about the union of souls and the sublime in life something embarrassing as it was ridiculous. And yet, as I thought of Lady Margaret, a lively interest in this young girl who took her young life so seriously, a keen anxiety for her future, which touched my old friend so nearly, took possession of me.

'Well, well,' I said to her, taking up my hat, and preparing to go, 'if life should not turn out quite such a sublime matter as you expect just now—on the whole, you may take my word for it that it will not—don't forget that you have an old godfather who has been delighted to make your acquaintance at last, and is anxious to do what he can now in the way of friendship to

make up for lost time. And if you should come across that kindred soul that you are looking for, let me know, my dear, will you?'

I held out my hand as I spoke; her reluctant fingers hardly touched mine.

'I shall try to do what is right,' she said. 'One ought always to do what is right, at whatever sacrifice to oneself.'

'Certainly, certainly,' I said, 'and that is in the Catechism, at any rate. "Your duty towards God and your duty towards your neighbour,"—you will find it all there.'

She looked at me a moment with her far-off, serious gaze, then turned away her head. What she thought of me I will not attempt to define with precision; but probably I should not be far wrong in believing that she held me as something infinitely below the large experience of her dreams, and my words as the empty prating of one who had missed communion with the

sublime life. The conviction that such an opinion is held at one's own expense, inevitably impresses one disagreeably, whatever calmness of reason and just estimate of oneself may be brought to bear in opposition. No, I was not altogether sorry to leave my goddaughter and escape to the frivolities of the outer world, to the common sunshine and the happy influences of the spring day; to that saner sense of life, its troubles and its joys, which an old man of sixty-two may be allowed, perhaps, to have won through his sixty-two years of life and experience.

CHAPTER III.

On thinking over the interview with my goddaughter, that evening, two principal impressions, I found, had remained on my mind; the impression of a strange and not altogether pleasing personality; and the impression left by the flowers she had worn in front of her gown. They had appeared to me, as I have said, identical with those bought by my new acquaintance at the corner of the Palazzo Strozzi; and though I might, of course, be occupying myself with a mere coincidence, was I to believe that the glimpse I had had of a young girl's fair cheek and pale gold coil of hair as she passed me in the carriage,

was a coincidence also? This struck me as too large a demand upon one's belief in the accidents of life. No—I had, in truth, no doubt whatever that it was Elisabeth, whom I had seen seated in the carriage at Lady Margaret's side; and the fact impressed me, I must own, as disagreeably as possible. I have no objection to romance —I have said so before—to romance in young men especially; but discretion, to my mind, is the more excellent gift in woman. Was it possible that my goddaughter, who in appearance was discretion itself, should not be discreet; that she should be allowing, nay, accepting, however distantly, the silent homage of a youth whose name was probably unknown to her? I was reluctant, indeed, to admit the idea. It is true, there was something in Elisabeth that made her unlike other young girls; something that to me personally was both baffling and repel-

lant. And yet she seemed a right-minded girl enough, good to her grandmother, good to the poor; and she was Lady Margaret's granddaughter. Finally, I determined to suspend any definite opinion concerning her until we should be better acquainted.

I was punctual to my appointment at the frame-maker's the following day, and had not waited five minutes when young Morelli appeared with the picture under his arm. He greeted me with the charming expansiveness of manner that made me feel as if I had known the young fellow for years, and threw himself forthwith into the business of ordering a frame. The matter speedily settled, we left the shop together; I was returning to my hotel, and I gave a ready consent to his proposal to accompany me part of the way; for I was, in fact, not a little anxious to arrive at a

clearer understanding of yesterday's incident. He made no allusion to it, however; but walked on, talking of a hundred indifferent subjects with the same easy fluency that he had shown the previous day. I myself at last introduced the matter with some abruptness.

'Are you in the habit,' I inquired, 'of throwing flowers to young ladies every day as they drive home from the Cascine?'

'Only to one young lady,' he answered, without hesitation, 'naturally, one only could inspire the sentiment that would prompt me to do so.'

'But I understood you to say yesterday,' I answered—'I believe I am not mistaken—that this lady is quite unknown to you.'

'That is true in one sense; I have never yet spoken to her. But she is and always must be for me, the one woman in the world. I adore her.'

He spoke with a sort of serious passion which impressed me. The young fellow might be mad, but he was in earnest.

'Has it never occurred to you,' I said, in a moment, 'that you may compromise this lady whom you adore by throwing flowers to her on a public promenade? Naturally it must be remarked by those standing about.'

'It is impossible that it should compromise her,' he said, with the same serious intensity, 'since no one could fail to see that it is a mark of respectful homage to one unknown. She herself, I am persuaded, understands it as such. In any case, it is the only way in which I can at present make my feelings known. I am personally unacquainted with the young lady and her family; and I have no immediate means of gaining an introduction, though I shall discover a way before long. I know, of course, that she is English. The first time

I saw her,' he went on, more rapidly, 'was about a fortnight ago. I was walking down the Lung' Arno at sunset, when, happening to look up, I saw her standing at an open window on the first floor of the hotel at which she is staying. She had a book in her hand, but she was not reading. She was leaning forward a little over the iron railing that protects the window in front; she wore a white gown; the red light from the west was on it, and on her face and her hair. She looked—I could not attempt to tell you how she looked; I had never dreamed of anyone so divine. Her eyes were fixed on the sky; but in a moment she looked down, and I may have been wrong, but I imagined she understood something of what my eyes must have expressed. Immediately afterwards she closed the window and disappeared. I saw her no more that evening; but I watched the hotel the next day and the next, and for

days after, till I learned to know her hours of going out and in. She rarely leaves the house except for her afternoon drive. I have never yet spoken to her in words; but she knows now, as well as a silent adoration can inform her, the worship I offer her in my heart.'

All this my young Italian, with a fluent choice of language, but with the same serious calm, as he walked along at my side, swinging a little stick he held in his hand backwards and forwards. He appeared to find no indiscretion in confiding his love-story to a man whom he had seen for the first time the day before; and oddly enough this very absence of reserve impressed me with a sense of earnestness and tenacity of purpose. He treated it all as a matter of course, as an inseparable part of his daily life. Under other circumstances I might have been touched or entertained by the confidence; the story from

the young lover's point of view might have interested me. But I remembered where I had last seen the flowers thrown by this unknown and unthought-of youth; and I felt neither entertained nor touched.

'My good fellow,' I said, 'you know nothing, you affirm, of this young lady and her family, but as it happens, I do; and I may as well tell you at once that you might as well think of winning the moon out of the sky, or an angel from among the stars, as of winning her.'

'If you know her, you can introduce me,' he replied promptly, paying no heed to the concluding words of my sentence.

'No such thing,' I answered, 'it is the last thing I should dream of doing. I tell you, because your love-affair having made no particular progress at present, it is as well to warn you in time that it cannot possibly come to any good. Let the thing be, my good boy. That young

lady belongs to a family who would think more than one royal prince beneath her notice'

'Does she share their opinions?' he asked.

I was annoyed by his pertinacity, as I might not have been had my own mind been clear of doubt on that particular point.

'I have never inquired,' I answered, drily, 'she at least knows her duty.'

He stood still, and looked at me for a moment with a sort of serious smile.

'Heaven and earth,' he said, 'could not move me in this matter; so though I am obliged by your advice, I must go my own way. If an angel from the stars were in truth in question, I should pursue the same course. I suppose you mean that this lady belongs to some great English family. Excuse me, but what the devil do I care for your great English families?'

He raised his hat courteously, a brighter

smile illuminating his handsome young face, and disappeared down a side street, whilst I pursued my way alone to the hotel; turning over in my mind as I went, with no small vexation of spirit, the various aspects of a silly affair that threatened to prove presently troublesome.

I was not destined, however, to reach my inn without further adventure. I was pursuing my way down the Lung' Arno in the direction of the Cascine, when a momentary block occurred where some paving-stones had been taken up for repair, and a carriage drew up close by the footway where I was waiting until I could cross the road. The carriage was an open one, occupied by a lady only; she happened to turn her head in my direction, and I at once recognized her as an old Florentine acquaintance, Countess Zelowsky. The recognition was mutual.

'Dr. Somers!' she cried, holding out

both her hands over the carriage door, 'what happy chance brings you to Florence? What a pleasure to see you again—a pleasure, and yet a pain,' she added, withdrawing one hand, and pressing her handkerchief for a moment to her eyes.

Countess Zelowsky was a Russian, a woman of five or six-and-thirty, with a fair faded face, light frizzled hair, and the air and elegance of a woman of fashion. On my uninitiated eyes, she made the impression of being invariably dressed from head to foot in black lace; but an intimate lady friend of mine assured me that many other materials, such as silk and velvet and satin went to the composition of the Countess's elaborate toilettes; adding, however, with a sigh, that her black lace was in fact of a description to make her fellow-women grow pale with envy. This same friend was obliging enough to furnish me

with not a few details of the Countess's early history, that concerned me the less, that my relations with Countess Zelowsky were not of a kind to make her early history of importance to me one way or the other; and that I had moreover, heard as many histories of the same description in Florence, as would, but for a certain monotony of incident, furnish the novelist of a Paris journal with material for a year. When I first knew the Countess, she had lately lost her son, an only child, and was in great and genuine sorrow. As is not unfrequently, the case, however, the grief itself, its bewilderment and the limitations it set upon her life, was almost as great a trouble to her as the loss that occasioned it, and she was seeking distraction in whatever direction it might be decorously found. Nothing for the moment appeared to her more appropriate and attractive than what may be termed

the dissipations of religion; and a sermon that I preached in the English church at Florence was the cause of our first acquaintance. She gained an introduction to me through the friend I have already mentioned, and affirming that certain words I had uttered had made on her the deepest impression, assured me that it would be a consolation to her in her affliction to consult with me on spiritual matters. I had no difficulty in understanding the sort of woman with whom I had to deal; but it was not for me to refuse any consolation that it was in my power to offer the poor lady in her affliction. I went, therefore, from time to time to see her.

She used to talk a great deal, chiefly about herself and her soul; her remarks on these absorbing topics were not always very edifying, and when the conversation took a turn of which I disapproved I used to get

up and leave her. Still she always sent for me again, until she presently began to express vague longings to leave the Greek Church of which she was a member, and seek repose in the purer faith of the Church of England. I told her roundly, that the state of mental excitement in which she then found herself, was not a fitting moment to exchange the faith in which she had been brought up for one of which she knew practically nothing, that the great sources of consolation to which I had endeavoured to lead her, were common to every branch of the Christian community, and that I advised her to leave the consideration of subtler points of doctrine, till she could bring a calmer judgment to bear on them. After this, her black-edged notes pursued me less persistently; and happening one day to enter the Church of San Marco where a Jesuit father of well-known eloquence was delivering one

of a course of sermons, I perceived the Countess Zelowsky seated among his auditors in an attitude of the most rapt attention. I was not surprised, therefore, on going a few days later without previous appointment, to take leave of her on the occasion of my departure from Florence, to find her and the father closeted together, and to feel my entrance an intrusion. We parted excellent friends, however. She was an extremely agreeable and accomplished woman, and found her place naturally in the first society in Florence, giving herself certain airs of exclusiveness indeed, which she threw aside readily to meet the caprice of the moment. She was in particular, an admirable musician; sometimes in the midst of one of our conversations she would rise without any warning, and going to the piano sit down and play for ten or twenty minutes together in a style that no professional

artist could excel; then breaking off suddenly as she began, return to her seat, and resume the conversation. She wrote poetry also of a semi-mystical, semi-religious character in several languages, even in her own; and the reading and translation of these poems, which melodiously expressed the unfathomable despair with which for various reasons her soul was devoured, was another interlude that lightened our talks. She spoke French of course, as Russians speak it, and English as well as you or I. I learnt, always through the medium of my friend at Florence, that after my departure she was on the point of joining the Roman Catholic Church, so much so, that her conversion was announced in more than one Ultramontane organ; when happening to form a friendship with an English Quaker lady, the mystic and Quietist side of that particular persuasion attracted her so strongly, that

she suddenly veered round, threw over the Jesuit father, and devoted herself to the silent worship. This was the last I had heard of her, as my friend and kindly correspondent shortly afterwards left Florence.

Such a woman was the Countess Zelowsky who accosted me on that bright spring day in the friendliest tones.

'What a pleasure to see you again,' she said, holding my hand in hers. 'Have you been long in Florence? And you have not been to see me? Only two days—but in two days there are forty-eight hours; in forty-eight hours you might surely have found ten minutes for an old friend, and one who owes you so much, so much—— But you are in Florence for some time,' she went on, immediately; 'we shall see a great deal of each other. Let us begin at once; come into the carriage with me now—but no, I forgot, I must not ask you

now; I am on my way unfortunately to fulfil an engagement that cannot be postponed. Come and see me in two hours—but no, in two hours I have an appointment; how unfortunate that to-day, of all days, I should be overwhelmed with engagements. Come and see me this evening; yes, that will be best. We shall be quite alone, you know; my little cousin, Nathalie S——, is staying with me, but she will not interfere with us in the least; we will sit and talk of old days. Come in about nine, Dr. Somers; I am expecting one or two people early, and we are going to a ball later on; but we shall not leave much before twelve; I shall still have my evening to give to my old friend.'

As a result of this somewhat confused invitation, I found myself that evening climbing the stairs to Countess Zelowsky's apartment on the Lung' Arno Nuovo. It

was on a high second-floor, an apartment of small, but numerous rooms, about which a scent of pastilles or incense or I know not what occult and mysterious odour always seemed to linger. It greeted me now as I entered her well-remembered little salon, mirrored, curtained and furnished with tapestry arm-chairs. The Countess was writing at a small table, but she rose and came forward to receive me, then sank into the corner of a sofa near the fire; she was in full dress, with the black lace arranged in draperies that reached half way across the room, and diamonds gleaming here and there. She introduced me to her cousin, Countess Nathalie S——, a charming, blooming, round-faced little girl of seventeen or so, in a white ball-dress, and with so simple and honest an expression that I felt sorry she should be left exposed to the irregular influences of her sentimental relative. A tea-table with a

samovar stood in one corner of the room to which Countess Nathalie at once retreated, to pour out cups of tea that were brought to the Countess and myself by a youth who was also in the room when I entered, and who had been briefly named by my hostess as 'Another cousin of mine —Sergius Zelowsky.' He was a brown-faced lad with dark moustache and eyes, and presently he retired with Countess Nathalie into an adjoining room where the piano stood. The scrape of a violin was heard with a pianoforte accompaniment, then a few wrong notes, a pause, a burst of laughter, and so *da capo*. Evidently the young people were amusing themselves in an innocent, youthful fashion. Countess Zelowsky glanced at the open door and slightly shrugged her shoulders; then looked at me, and sighed.

'Jeunesse, jeunesse,' she murmured, 'what would you and I, Dr. Somers, give

to be in the place of those young people at this moment?'

'Speaking for myself, Countess,' I answered, 'I cannot imagine wishing to exchange my present position for any other in the world. Age has its privileges as well as youth—its privileges of friendship.'

She smiled. 'Sit down,' she said, pointing to a seat opposite to her; I had been standing until now in front of the fire. 'Tell me, my friend,' she said, 'have you once thought of me since we parted?'

'Can you ask such a question?' I answered. 'I have thought of you frequently. And then, you know, I have had news of you.'

'News of me?' she said.

'Yes; and news that after the conversations we formerly held together could not but interest me deeply. I heard that

you were on the point of entering the Roman Catholic Church.'

'Ah, you heard that,' she murmured, taking a bunch of violets from a glass close by and smelling them. The room was full of flowers; the Countess, like all Russians, was devoted to them.

'Yes,' I said, 'and then that you were about to join the Quaker community.'

'Ah, for that, no,' she said, raising herself with energy, 'that was an idea that never once entered my head. There is a side of that peculiar sect that appealed to me, I own; a mystic, imaginative, silent side. But to become a Quakeress—'

She smelt the violets again, then smiling, handed them to me. 'It is true,' she went on, in a moment, 'since parting with you, my friend, I have been through many experiences. I have had occasion to reflect very deeply. A woman left alone in the world must necessarily do so; time,

sorrow, loneliness, approaching age, all tend to reflection. And I have come finally to the conclusion that all creeds are one, that each contains all and nothing, and that to emancipate oneself therefore from all fixed and definite forms of belief, is the only course left open to a rational being. You agree, I am sure.'

'Hardly,' I answered, 'if I understand you rightly. I am a clergyman of the Church of England, you know; and that, as you will not, I think, have forgotten, holds a very well-defined form of faith.'

'True,' she said, 'and I ought not perhaps to have claimed your sympathy on that point. Nevertheless, it is the point at which I myself finally arrived; it satisfied me, and yet, shall I confess it? it left a certain void, a blank. These great questions had occupied me so long, that when I decided to dismiss them, life

seemed to have suddenly lost its interest for me.'

'Your fellow-creatures—' I suggested, as she paused.

'My fellow-creatures do not interest me,' she answered, coldly. 'I cannot imagine why they should. My one or two friends are inexpressibly dear to me; but the world and I have nothing in common, and vulgar excitements, I need not say, lie altogether outside my vision. No; I shall always look upon it as a special providence, that just as the vast blank of existence was making itself felt in the perishing of all my old beliefs, a new and unfathomable field of investigation was opened to me. It was quite by chance that I came upon a book treating of the relations between the visible and the invisible worlds and the possibility of communicating with the unseen; but since reading it I have felt that no subject can

be of an interest so vital, so absorbing, especially to one who——'

She sighed and passed her handkerchief across her eyes. 'Do you allude to spiritualism?' I inquired.

'To what is called spiritualism, yes. The name, like everything else in these days, has been vulgarized, and an effort made to treat the matter as one for mere curiosity and diversion. But the pure essence, the essential soul of the truth remains. I think, Dr. Somers, I have never heard you speak on the subject, and am uncertain whether to claim you as a fellow-believer or not.'

'Do I believe in spiritualism?' I said, 'no, I most certainly do not.'

'Ah, that is an answer unworthy of you,' she cried, 'without attempting to define what you mean or what I mean by spiritualism, you reply in that positive tone affected by all sceptics in the matter.

But I, who spend the greater part of my life now in investigating and verifying the phenomena, do not despair of convincing you in time of how strange a region lies outside our ordinary life. My difficulty so far has been to find a medium sufficiently *en rapport* with myself to give me the full communication I crave with the unseen; for my conviction is that the partial and imperfect communications which are all that have yet been achieved are due to imperfect sympathy between the medium and the inquirer. Could two souls be found in perfect harmony, with no such gross obstruction of imperfect sympathies, I am convinced that the communications between the spirit evoked and the earthly inquirer would be practically limitless. That is my theory, which I am bent on proving; and I believe I have found such a medium.'

'You have found one?' I said. I

knew little enough about spiritualism, but I had a strong impression that even from her own point of view she was talking nonsense. 'And what,' I inquired, 'has been the result?'

'I have not yet had the opportunity of thoroughly testing her,' she answered, 'I have met her twice only at the house of a friend; and there, although she proved that she possessed the ordinary mesmeric power in no ordinary degree, the question of communication with the unseen world was not brought prominently forward. But I have a conviction that she is the person of whom I am in search—I am expecting her to-night, when I hope your eyes, my unbelieving friend, may be opened by some very singular experiences.'

'What!' I cried, starting up, 'do you mean that you have inveigled me here to assist at a table-rapping *séance?* No, no, Countess; a pretty sort of character I

should get if it became known that I countenanced any such proceedings. Besides, I entirely disapprove of them. Neither angels nor the devil take part in them so far as I am aware; but a good many neutrals, if I may use the expression, such as nerves and hysterics and credulity and foolishness, and what people call innocent fraud, all of which play mankind almost as many bad tricks as the devil himself.'

'How prejudiced you are,' said the Countess, smiling; 'who believes in the devil in these days? And as for rapping, that is the most elementary as it is the most imperfect of the modes of communication. Ah, you must not desert me, dear doctor; I should think I had offended you—if that were possible. Would it be possible? —Nathalie,' she continued, addressing the young girl who at that moment appeared in the curtained doorway between the two

rooms, 'give me another cup of tea, my child. I live upon tea, Dr. Somers.'

'That is very bad for you,' I answered, and might have said more; but my attention at that moment was diverted. A servant had brought in another lamp, and placed it where its light fell on a picture I had not previously noticed, and which it caused me some surprise to see here now. It stood by itself on a small table by the fireplace, propped against the wall; and it was, unless I was much mistaken, the identical copy of the Filippo Lippi that I had seen receiving its finishing touches in the Uffizi the previous day. I turned to the Countess.

'You have there a very admirable copy,' I said, 'and one that I believe I have seen before. Is it not by a young artist, named Dino Morelli?'

'Ah, you know him,' said the Countess. 'Yes, it is an admirable copy, as you say,

and it has only to-day come into my possession. I consider him to be a young man of extraordinary talent, whom it is my intention to introduce and bring forward. He interests me in every way. I had a long conversation with him to-day; he was brought up to be a priest, he told me, but he felt he had no real vocation, and made himself an artist instead. I think he felt how much I sympathised with his difficulties—his manner, at least, led me to imagine as much; he has a very charming manner for a young man of his position in life. I expect him this evening. He took an interest I could hardly have looked for in an Italian—you know, dear doctor, how despairingly unimaginative and matter-of-fact Italians are—in my spiritualist theories, and when I spoke to him of my new medium he almost begged to be invited to meet her; so I told him he might come. In fact, I shall

be glad of his presence. A very curious branch of the subject is the influence of different nationalities in the other world; I have a theory upon it—I have thought so deeply and exclusively on all these matters lately—and it is one of the points I am most anxious to elucidate.'

I perceived that my beautiful young Italian, with his luminous eyes and air of romance, had made a deep impression upon the impressionable Countess; and I own that my interest in the *dénouement* of the evening's entertainment, in the artist, the medium, and the Countess's theories, quite overcame any scruples I might feel as to countenancing a spiritualist *séance* by my presence. I resolved to see it to the end; not the less so that the countess' guests now beginning to arrive, our *tête-à-tête* conversation was brought to a close. The room was so small that it seemed almost full when from fifteen to

twenty people were assembled; some half-dozen or so of men, of all ages and apparently of all nationalities; as many women, Russians for the most part, young, pretty, languid, dressed with that particular style that marks a woman of an ultra-fashionable set, and, to English eyes, of a somewhat exotic cultivation. All these people seemed to be on terms of intimate acquaintance with each other, and with the Countess, who, resuming her seat on the sofa, was speedily surrounded by a small court, to whom she dispensed smiles or sentiment as occasion demanded. I had fallen naturally into the background, and taken up the position of a silent observer, during this influx of the *habitués* of the house; and one other person I noticed stood aloof like myself, with the air of knowing no one, and feeling no special interest in anyone present. It was my young Italian, Dino Morelli. He did not

see me at first; I was standing, as I have said, in the background, half-hidden, in fact, in the curtained recess of the window; but presently, by an impulse natural in an artist, he went up to his picture to study its effect in its new quarters. He had taken it up, and was looking at it by the light of a lamp close by, when I accosted him.

'So,' I said, 'I was not aware that you were acquainted with my old friend, Countess Zelowsky.'

'I have known her for three days,' he answered, with a smile; 'we met first in the Uffizi the day before yesterday. She saw this copy, and, taking a fancy to it, bought it on the spot. A good day's work for me.'

'Three days!' I said. 'I did not suppose your acquaintance to be of such recent date. On the contrary, the Countess spoke in a way that led me to imagine

you to be on terms of some intimacy with her.'

'She is a very interesting woman,' he answered, looking at her across the room, 'and to anyone in sympathy with her, it would not, I fancy, be a difficult matter to gain her friendship in a very brief space of time. It was not, however, to see her that I came to-night; I understood that I was to meet——'

He broke off, an extraordinary change coming over his countenance. He was looking towards the door, and turning my eyes in the same direction, I saw, to my profound astonishment, my goddaughter entering the room. She was alone, and paused for one second on the threshold between the looped-up curtains that draped the doorway. Then, as the Countess rose to meet her, she came forward.

No, I had certainly not erred in my judgment that Elisabeth was a striking-

looking girl. So striking indeed was her appearance now that every head in the room was turned towards her. She wore a white gown of some shining material, fashioned simply as the black one in which I had previously seen her; a gown which, while fitting closely to her figure, seemed, by some dressmaker's art, to fall seamless from neck to hem, like the angelic costume designed by some old Tuscan or Umbrian painter. Her strange eyes, and her hair. bright, but colourless almost in the subdued lamplight as that of one of Fra Angelico's blond angels, enhanced this curious Paradisaical effect, for which I gave my goddaughter great credit; perceiving, what my ignorance perhaps of these feminine subtleties had prevented my perceiving before, that she was no more indifferent to the advantages of a becoming toilette than every well-conducted young woman ought to be. Round her

neck, suspended by a slender gold chain, she wore a diamond medallion, her only ornament; and not all the trains and draperies of the other women present could have suited her admirable figure and particular style of beauty so well as the simple fashion of her shining white gown. Countess Zelowsky, my lady-friends were more than once careful to instruct me, was in her way the best-dressed woman they knew; undoubtedly she had an air of fashion and distinction with which Elisabeth could not compete; and yet as the two met now in the middle of the room, no one I believe would have looked for the moment at the elder woman by the side of the fair and dazzling apparition of my goddaughter.

The Countess received her with immense effusiveness and many caressing expressions of welcome. She drew her down on the sofa beside her, she desired the fresh-faced

little Nathalie to bring her a cup of tea, she introduced to her one and another of the gentlemen standing about. I was unable to see with what countenance my goddaughter received these demonstrations, for her face was turned from me; only the back of her head was visible above the sofa on which she was seated. Young Morelli and I were, in fact, forgotten for the time in the background; and my attention was presently diverted and quite occupied by the young fellow's demeanour. He stood leaning a little forward, his hands grasping the back of a chair, whilst his eyes were fixed on the coil of white-gold hair just in front of him with an immovable stare that I feared would, in another moment, attract general attention.

'Come into the next room with me, will you?' I said, touching him on the arm. 'Countess Zelowsky has a Murillo there which she believes to be genuine. I have

always made myself disagreeable to her by maintaining that it is a copy ; I should like your opinion in the matter.'

He followed me mechanically into the adjoining room. I held up a candle to the picture, and he stood contemplating it in silence for a long while. Presently he turned away.

'Well?' I said, setting down the light, as he did not speak, 'am I right or wrong?'

'I beg your pardon,' he said vaguely, looking round the room. I perceived that he had not an idea for what purpose he had entered it. 'I must ask the Countess to introduce me at once,' he said, moving towards the door again.

'To my goddaughter? To Miss St. Just? My good boy, I could introduce you myself, if that were all. But to speak quite frankly I should have preferred, I own, under the circumstances, that you

should first be introduced to her grandmother, Lady Margaret St. Just.'

'Her grandmother? Her grandmother is not here,' he said, staring and frowning at me.

'Very true,' I replied, 'nevertheless, you must surely understand——' and how further I might have explained myself, I do not know; for at that moment I became aware of the Countess's voice inquiring for me in the adjoining salon.

'Dr. Somers—what has become of Dr. Somers?' I heard her saying. 'We must on no account begin without him. I am particularly anxious he should be present.'

I made my appearance in the doorway. 'I am here, Countess,' I said, 'in what can I be useful to you?'

'Only as a convert, dear doctor,' she cried, with an air of charming gaiety, which she sometimes allowed to alternate with

her moments of sentiment. 'We are going to make a few experiments which may or may not have the results I anticipate, but which will, I trust in any case, send you home with a mind more open to conviction than it appeared to be an hour ago. Since my young friend here has arrived, we are in a position to begin immediately.'

I glanced round the room. Its aspect had somewhat changed in the few minutes since I left it; the company had arranged itself in an irregular circle, and appeared to be waiting with various degrees of interest or indifference for the Countess's experiments to begin. On my right was seated Countess Nathalie, with a certain solemnity on her face; next to her was the brown-faced youth; beyond them, an Italian marchese with fair beard and moustache was laughing and joking with a Russian lady of high degree, who sat languidly listening and waving a huge

feather fan to and fro. Two people only were standing, the Countess and my goddaughter; and as I looked at them, it flashed on me for the first time that Elisabeth was the undeveloped medium who was to facilitate the Countess's communications with the spirit-world. Yes, there could be no doubt about it. There she stood on the verge of the circle, her eyes cast down, her hand held by the Countess, her unruffled countenance betraying neither pleasure nor displeasure at the prominent part she was expected to play. I had not before had the opportunity to speak to her; and now, instead of seating myself, I advanced and addressed her.

'Good evening, my dear,' I said; 'it is an unexpected pleasure to see you here to-night. Lady Margaret, I am afraid, is not well enough to venture out.'

'Grandmamma is seldom well enough to go out in the evening,' she answered, in

her cold gentle voice, 'but as Countess Zelowsky assured us this was to be quite a small party, she made no objection to my coming by myself.'

She looked at me as she spoke with her usual strange, impassive expression; but all at once her eyes, dilating as if with surprise, went beyond me, a flame shot into them, and I felt a thrill pass through the hand that lay indifferently in mine. Flame and thrill were gone in an instant; her eyelids dropped, and gently disengaging her hand, she turned away her head. But the incident struck me unpleasantly when, looking round, I saw Dino Morelli standing a few paces behind me, gazing at his goddess, with a fire which, so far from being momentary, blazed with an ardour sufficient, one would say, to consume the whole company. In him, indeed, it did not surprise me. When a young man is in love, he is in love; *tout est dit.* But my god-

daughter!—Was I to suppose that this young fellow's good looks and silent devotion had touched her to the point that she recognised in him that kindred soul who was to fulfil and glorify life for her? And at the idea I nearly laughed, though it was no laughing matter; for you see, though I had had a cure of souls for nearly forty years of my life, I had never in my life heard them so much talked about as during these last thirty-six hours.

I stepped back to young Morelli. 'Let us sit down,' I said, laying my hand on his shoulder, 'we are in people's way here, don't you see?'

I managed to draw him to the back of the circle, but he would not sit down; he remained standing, leaning against the wall, and I placed myself at his side. My interest in the Countess's proceedings, languid before, had increased to a very unpleasant degree within the last ten minutes.

Recently as I had made my goddaughter's acquaintance, I yet felt a certain responsibility in regard to her; a feeling by no means diminished by her singular personality and enigmatic character. I stood attentive, therefore, prepared to interfere should I see occasion to do so; whilst the Countess, still holding Elisabeth's hand, addressed with much grace and fluency the little circle. She spoke in French, the language she had the habit of using in general society.

'This is not a regular *séance*,' she said, smiling, and looking round, 'it would have been impossible for me to organize one for this evening; and in fact, our society is perhaps too mixed for anything of the kind to be seriously attempted. Yes, marchese,' with a wave of her fan in the direction of the fair-bearded Italian, 'you are an insuperable obstacle, and you know it. No, don't protest, and don't go away;

unbelievers are invaluable sometimes, and I am charmed to see both you and another sceptical friend of mine here to-night. You are more than welcome, I assure you. But everyone present,' she continued, looking again round the circle, 'is aware, I believe, of the deep interest I take in the problems of what is generally called spiritualism, and how eagerly I seek after everything that may place it on a firmer basis and obtain wider and more spiritual results. Under the circumstances of this evening, however, it may perhaps be well to set aside for the present the deeper and more occult subjects of inquiry; and my chief motive for the moment in inviting your attention is to allow my young friend, Miss St. Just, to exhibit her mesmeric powers. For although mesmerism and spiritualism are distinct, the two are yet so closely allied that I have a conviction that Miss St. Just will develop

powers as a medium no less remarkable than her powers as a mesmerist.'

'Permit me, madame,' said a thin eager man, starting up, 'you are desirous, if I understand you rightly, to test this young lady's powers as a medium, powers that you affirm to be as yet untried. Have no manifestations ever attended her presence? And in any case would it not be better that she should be thrown into the mesmeric trance, rather than that she should exhaust herself by producing it in others? I am entirely at your service, you know.'

'You are always goodness itself, doctor, I am aware,' said the Countess indifferently, waving him aside, 'but I must be allowed to conduct this matter in accordance with my own views. Miss St. Just is kind enough to say she is quite prepared, and the only question is, which among us will be the best subject.'

She let her eyes pass slowly round the circle. The fair-bearded marchese sprang up instantly.

'I am ready, perfectly ready, Countess,' he cried, bringing forward his chair into the centre of the circle; 'pray allow me to be the first victim. Under such sweet influences I could be content to slumber for ever.'

'No, no, marchese,' said the Countess, gaily, 'we know you too well. For your own sake I advise you to remain tranquil; for after all, you know, you are here only on sufferance this evening. Who shall it be? Sergius—Nathalie—Dr. Somers, it is of no use to appeal to you—ah, yes, precisely——'

My attention had for the moment been called away by Countess Nathalie, who had half-risen at her cousin's appeal, with a look at once eager and timid on her little round face. But the brown-faced youth

at her side laid a detaining hand on her arm, and she sank back again, turning to her companion with a confiding smile that assured me she had found a safer protector than her many-sided relative was likely to prove herself. The change in Countess Zelowsky's voice, however, as she spoke the last words, recalled me to the circle; and looking round, I perceived that young Morelli, whom I had intended to keep safe under my eye, had slipped away from my side. Not only so; he had placed himself where I could least have wished to see him, in the chair, namely, that the Countess had caused to be placed in the midst of the circle, his eyes fixed persistently as ever on my goddaughter's face. She, meanwhile, stood motionless and inanimate, with downcast eyes, her hands dependent at her side; inattentive, as it seemed, to the attention she awoke, as to the inces-

sant flutter kept up about her by Countess Zelowsky.

'Silence, if you please,' said this latter now with a circular wave of her ever-ready fan. 'Dr. Somers, might I ask you to lower that lamp—we have too much light. Now, Miss St. Just, we are ready, I believe, if you will fulfil your kind promise.'

Elisabeth advanced slowly at the words, her eyes downcast as before. She did not look beautiful at that moment; her blank expressionless air as she moved forward, unconscious apparently of the gaze directed upon her by every eye in the room, gave her the aspect of being herself in a mesmeric trance, or of walking in her sleep. At a short distance from Dino Morelli, she paused, and lifting her arms from her side, still without raising her eyes, began mechanically to make the first mesmeric passes. An absolute silence now reigned

in the room, a sense that something unusual was passing; the hurrying breath of one or two of the spectators was the only sound audible. For myself, I could not remove my eyes from the two young people before me. The flaming ardour that darted from the young Italian's eyes, the white impassiveness of Elisabeth, held the attention by a contrast so singular, that I own I could not have stirred to interfere, even had I desired it. Gradually beneath young Morelli's persistent gaze, a faint colour rose to my goddaughter's cheeks; with her hands still raised, she advanced slowly step by step, as one dragged forward against her will; whilst by a simultaneous movement, Morelli, with his arms resting on those of the chair in which he was seated, lifted himself to meet her. Her eyelids raised themselves reluctantly, as though against some heavy weight; she paused, their eyes met, hers kindled into

life; and so for nearly a minute the two must have stood confronting each other with parted lips and suspended breath, glance answering glance with an eloquence, a melting fire of passion that held not only themselves, but everyone present spell-bound. Involuntarily they drew closer together; nor do I know how the scene might have ended, but that all at once my goddaughter heaved a deep sigh, looked vaguely round, stretching out her hands helplessly, and fell back into my arms, as I started forward just in time to receive her.

'Enough of this,' I cried, angrily. 'Countess, what did I tell you? You get hold of a nervous, hysterical, excitable girl to execute your follies, and this is the result. As for you,' I went on, turning with no less anger on Dino Morelli who had pressed forward, 'don't show yourself again to-night. I have no patience with you. What business have you to persecute

a lady you never spoke to in your life with your insane folly?'

The circle had broken up in confusion, and a dozen people were crowding round Elisabeth. She had not fainted, as I at first believed: or if she had, the faintness lasted for a moment only. She roused herself, and allowed me to lead her into the next room, which was empty. What became of the remaining guests, I do not know; I saw none of them again. I took my goddaughter home as soon as she had drunk a glass of wine that the Countess presently brought her; we exchanged hardly three words on the way, but I did not leave her until I had seen her safely placed in the care of her grandmother's maid.

CHAPTER IV.

I called early the next day at the hotel on the Lung' Arno, and was told that Lady Margaret would see me. Miss St. Just, the servant informed me on our way to the salon, had not yet left her room; she was suffering from a bad headache; and Lady Margaret presently confirmed this statement.

'Elisabeth goes out so little,' she said, 'that the excitement of even a small party is sometimes too much for her. It was, I believe, quite a small party last night, Dr. Somers?'

'About twenty people,' I replied.

'Have you seen your granddaughter to-day, Lady Margaret?'

'Not yet,' she answered. 'I am myself only just out of my room. We are sad lazy people,' she said smiling, 'but there is nothing easier than to fall into invalid ways, and nothing harder than to get out of them again.'

She looked so frail, that invalid ways belonged to her, one would say, of right; too frail, I thought to myself, to be an efficient guardian to her granddaughter.

'Lady Margaret,' I said, 'might I inquire whether you are at all intimately acquainted with Countess Zelowsky?'

'I have known her slightly for years,' she answered; 'we have been at each other's houses; she knows all the best people here, you know. Intimately, no; I have known perhaps six people intimately in my life. Countess Zelowsky is certainly not one of them.'

'I, on the other hand,' I said, 'have had the opportunity to know Countess Zelowsky about as intimately as it falls in one's way to know anyone not immediately connected with oneself. She has her good points, no doubt; I should be sorry to think otherwise; but she is not a woman I should trust, or whose society I should think likely to benefit your granddaughter. You will excuse my saying this, I know.'

'Dear Dr. Somers, it is only kindness on your part. But to tell you the truth, I was glad to have Elisabeth go to her house last night. The poor child has so little amusement. I could not of course allow her to go to large parties without a chaperon, and she is not a girl, I am happy to say, to make acquaintance easily. But she and Countess Zelowsky seem to have taken a mutual liking for each other. I have never myself greatly cared for Countess Zelowsky, as I said before; she struck

me, as she seems to have struck you, as a somewhat superficial and inconsequent woman; but she has always known everyone best worth knowing in Florence. I met her constantly in my own set in the days when I was able to go into society here, and we have many old acquaintance in common. If Elisabeth indeed were a giddy flighty girl, or had any touch of the horrible fastness of the young people of the present day, I might feel a difficulty about ever letting her out of my sight. But if anything she is too sober, too steady. If I could bring myself to find a fault with my dear child, it would be, perhaps, that she just lacks that finishing touch and grace that a little more mingling with society would give her. Just a little experience in the ways of this wicked world will do her no harm, if I may be permitted to say such a thing to her godfather,' she concluded, with a smile.

I shook my head. 'Countess Zelowsky knows far too many of the ways of this wicked world,' I said, 'and these steady girls prove themselves occasionally apter pupils than one would think. Besides there are other reasons——' I hesitated a moment. On reflection and in consideration of my old friend's feeble health and uncertain powers, I had decided to say nothing of the scene that had last night made so painful an impression on myself. The scene indeed, apart from suspicions that I should not have cared to formulate, had little meaning; for as regards the mesmerism, I attached little importance to it in itself. I had no idea that, outside the Countess's imagination, my goddaughter was either a mesmerist or a medium, though like many other people, she might probably enough have entertained herself by trying her powers as the former. No, rightly or wrongly, I had decided to say

nothing to Lady Margaret of what might have perplexed and frightened, without enlightening her. But in view of the possibility of Elisabeth's meeting him again, I thought it right to instruct her in the episode of my love-crazed young Italian. Rather to my dismay, she treated the whole matter very lightly, with no stronger sentiment indeed than some slight indignation that I should suppose it possible the affair could have a serious aspect.

'Elisabeth is my granddaughter, Dr. Somers,' she said; 'how can you suppose it possible she should even look at a nameless Italian artist of whom she knows nothing?'

'He is quite worth looking at, I assure you,' I answered, 'as handsome a young fellow as ever I saw in my life.'

'Oh,' she said, with real indignation now, 'you would not accuse Elisabeth of being influenced by the good looks of a

young man of whom she can know nothing but that he is beneath her in every way?'

'I accuse her of nothing, believe me,' I said; 'you must remember, Lady Margaret, I know very little of your granddaughter. I am speaking merely from my knowledge of human nature in general, and of young human nature in particular, aided by one or two observations I made last night.'

'Ah, it is true, you know very little of her,' said my old friend, mollified, 'if you saw her every day as I do, so good and gentle and steady, with really no defects beyond those little wants in her character I have before spoken of, you would understand how unimportant all this story seems to me. You see, Dr. Somers, when one has to deal with one's own children, there is the character of one's whole family no less than their own to depend upon. I

should be doing not only Elisabeth, but all of us, injustice, by entertaining unworthy suspicions of her.'

I could say no more. It was not the first time I had been confronted by Lady Margaret's unalterable faith in everything and everyone belonging to her. She had a very sufficient and efficient knowledge of life and its pitfalls in general; but her imagination refused to contemplate them as possibly affecting anything personal to herself. I could only trust the caution I had intended to convey might influence her, and as I rose to go, I allowed myself one parting shot.

'Do you know anything of mesmerism, Lady Margaret?' I said. 'Your granddaughter, I understand, is a mesmerist.'

'Oh, surely not, Dr. Somers,' she said, with a smile, 'mesmerists are all charlatans, are they not? Do they not profess to work all sorts of wonderful cures?

Your kind anxiety about Elisabeth is misleading you, surely.'

'Well, I would ask her about it, if I were you,' I said, 'she may have been thrown with that sort of people in Stockholm, you know.' And with that I took my departure, very ill-satisfied with my interview, and presently made my way to Countess Zelowsky's house.

I was fortunate in finding that lady at home. She was alone and seated at her piano; and acknowledging my entrance by a slight movement of the head, went on playing for nearly half-an-hour before she spoke. I was in no hurry; otherwise not even her very delightful music might have prevented my impatience from growing stronger than my politeness. As it was, I found an irritation of the nerves gaining on me by degrees, that quite destroyed the enjoyment I generally found in her playing, and was near driving me from

the room, when she rose at last, giving me her left hand by way of greeting, whilst she arranged some music with the right.

'So,' she said then, seating herself on the sofa and inviting me to take an arm-chair opposite to her, 'I find that my medium and your goddaughter are one and the same person. What pleasant surprises life holds in store for us.'

'Countess Zelowsky,' I said, without sitting down, 'I suppose you would not do me a favour?'

'What a singular remark, Dr. Somers! A whole revelation of your opinion of my character, and one that only an Englishman, I verily believe, would make. You have found me so unamiable, then, so selfish, so unwilling to show kindness to others—— But do sit down. You will think better of me, I feel sure, than when you are standing; I shall at least, feel less crushed by your bad opinion of me.'

I sat down as desired.

'Forgive me,' I said, 'your imagination has interpreted my remark quite differently from what I intended. I meant of course, to express myself unworthy of your favour. But I will change its form; will you do me a favour?'

'With the greatest pleasure,' she said, with beaming eyes. 'What is it?'

'To forget that you ever imagined my goddaughter to be a medium, and let her entirely alone.'

'Ah,' she said, with an air of disappointment, 'I thought it was some favour altogether personal to yourself you were going to be good enough to suggest to me. And after all, it does not concern you at all.'

'I was horrified,' I went on, 'with the scene last night.'

'Horrified?' she said, 'and I found it so deeply interesting. It was a revelation to me.'

'A revelation of folly,' I said, indignantly.

'Ah, there you are wrong, doctor,' she answered; 'you must remember that you have not gone into these things as I have, and that what may appear folly to you, may well be the deepest wisdom to me. You must remember what I told you yesterday evening; that for a long time past all my researches, *ma recherche de l'absolu*, my philosopher's stone—all my researches, I say, have been directed to the discovery of two souls in such perfect sympathy that one may act as medium to the other without the slightest jar or obstacle or obstruction. All that spiritualists have hitherto done, has been like looking through cracked or obscure glass as compared with pure and flawless crystal. Now I verily believe I have found what I wanted—not in relation to myself; there I was in error—and I expect the most astonishing results.'

'Are you aware,' I said, abruptly, 'that that young Italian artist is madly in love with Miss St. Just?'

'No,' she answered, smiling, 'I saw them both for the first time three days days ago. How should I know anything about it?'

'Such however, is the case,' I said, 'and this being so, you will I feel sure, Countess, see the propriety of their not meeting at your house. No good can come of it in any way, no good whatever; but an infinite deal of mischief might be brewed were they to have the opportunity of seeing each other here.'

'Dear Dr. Somers,' said the Countess, touching a bell at her side, 'you are—how shall I express it? hardly yourself to-day. How can you imagine I should allow mischief to be brewed, as you term it, in my house? This is a question of science, not of love-making—The carriage,

Beppe,' this to the servant who had appeared in answer to the bell.—'You will excuse me, I am sure,' she said, turning to me and gathering her draperies about her, 'but I have an appointment at three, which it is absolutely necessary I should keep to the minute.'

I rose. 'And my favour is not granted after all,' I said.

'Anything for yourself, dear doctor,' she answered, with her sweetest smile; a smile I knew well, and in which something of hardness always lurked. 'You could not confer on me a greater pleasure than by making a request within my power to grant. Come in this evening, will you? We shall have some music. No? To-morrow evening then. I am always at home from nine till twelve to my intimate friends. Au revoir.'

She swept towards the door, and I went away provoked and baffled; with that sense

too, of having blundered, that inevitably waits upon any such baffling. And yet, as I reflected walking homewards, might I not be troubling myself without reason? Lady Margaret undoubtedly knew her granddaughter better than I did; and on what, after all, were my suspicions founded? On an accepted flower; on a glance, on a nothing.

That same evening I received a letter from an Italian friend who was about to superintend the opening of some newly discovered Etruscan tombs, and who invited me to be present on the occasion. A stronger temptation could not have been offered me; nay, the chance was one not to be thrown away, since I was at that time at work on my pamphlet on the latest Etruscan researches in Italy. I left Florence, and was absent nearly three weeks, during which I heard nothing of my goddaughter. I should not indeed be far from the truth in saying that

during all that period she only occasionally occupied my thoughts, so absorbing was the interest of the work on which we were engaged. Only as I was in the train returning to Florence, did I begin to wonder with some seriousness how matters had sped in my absence, and whether my forebodings or Lady Margaret's confidence had been justified.

I called on Lady Margaret immediately on my return, but I did not see her. She had been suffering, I was told by her English maid, from one of the fits of nervous prostration to which she was subject; and though much better and able to leave her room, was ordered perfect quiet. Miss St. Just was well, and as much with her grandmother as possible; but she was out at that moment. I left my card with a few lines written on it, announcing my return, and expressing the hope that I might soon see my old friend

again; and went away satisfied that all was so far well, and that I had been too ready to foresee disaster.

CHAPTER V.

The evening of that day, as I remember, set in wet and stormy, with a westerly gale that swept along the Arno valley. I had caused a little fire of olive-branches to be lighted on my hearth to cheer the chill gloom, and was sitting over it towards ten o'clock, my attention divided between the book on my knee and the sound of the rain and the river outside, when I was startled by a ring at the outer door that shut in my little apartment. I went to open it; a hotel messenger was standing there, who handed me a letter marked 'Immediate.' It was from Lady Margaret, a note with an enclosure.

'Dear Dr. Somers,' she wrote, 'can you come to me at once? I am in the greatest anxiety and perplexity. I cannot write more. The enclosed letter will explain.—M. St. J.'

The writing was almost illegible, a cramped and trembling old woman's hand. I turned to the enclosure. If there had been any trembling in the hand that wrote those lines, it did not appear. I had seen the writing once before, and knew it to be that of my goddaughter.

'Dear grandmamma,' the letter ran, 'I desire no concealment, I write without reserve to tell you of the step I am about to take—a step which I cannot hope you will approve, but which I feel to be as necessary to my life as to breathe the free air under heaven. I leave Florence for Leghorn to-night, attended by the Countess Zelowsky's maid; to-morrow I meet Dino Morelli, and we take the first steamer to England.

Immediately on our arrival there we shall be married. Do not attempt to detain me; any such effort would be useless. I have found life, and to part with life is death. If I cause you pain, forgive me. For me also the moment is not without pain; but it is the pain of a new birth

'Your granddaughter,

'ELISABETH ST. JUST.'

Ten minutes later I was at Lady Margaret's hotel. Her English maid, who met me at the door of her apartment, accosted me with subdued voice and countenance.

'My lady is very bad,' she said, in a half-whisper; 'she was taken with a sort of fit after reading Miss St. Just's letter. Oh! I know all about it, sir; I've lived with my lady this forty years. No, it's not a stroke, thank God; a sort of nervous attack; but at my lady's age, and with her health, there's no knowing what the end

may be. She'll see you, sir, and the sooner the better, for she wouldn't let me send for the doctor till you'd been.'

She ushered me into Lady Margaret's bed-room. My dear old friend was seated in a big arm-chair by the fire; she was dressed with her usual charming neatness and propriety, her laces and shawls arranged with the usual care; but the first sight of her gave me a terrible shock. Hardly could she have looked otherwise had she been at the point of death. She held out her trembling hand to me; for a moment she could not speak.

'I loved her,' she said at last, in a broken, hardly audible voice; 'she has gone to certain misery and ruin, and I might have saved her. It is my fault.'

'No one's less,' I answered, 'and she shall be saved yet. I will go myself to Leghorn and bring her back.'

A slight pressure of the old lady's

hand responded; but she did not speak.

'Do you know,' I said, 'to what hotel she has gone?'

She shook her head. 'Only the letter,' she said, faintly.

'It is no matter,' I answered, 'I shall not fail to find her. I will start by the earliest train to-morrow morning; by the evening she shall be with you once more. Trust to me.'

She made no answer beyond feebly pressing my hand again. 'You had better send for the doctor at once,' I said to her woman as I passed out, 'your mistress is very ill.'

In truth, the shock had been too great, and I believed her to be dying. Even now, at this distance of time, I could hardly perhaps find words to express the wrath, the burning indignation I felt towards everyone concerned, towards Elisabeth, towards young Morelli, above all,

towards Countess Zelowsky. I looked at my watch as I stepped into the street. It was not yet half-past ten; and I at once set off down the Lung' Arno, to carry out the intention I had formed in Lady Margaret's room; the intention, namely, of seeing Countess Zelowsky and demanding of her the information I had little doubt she could give, the name of the hotel at Leghorn or the address of the lodging to which my goddaughter was gone.

It was blowing hard, as I have said, and pouring with rain. The sky spread black overhead, the river ran black beneath, between the rows of flickering lamps; the pavement glistened with pools of water, into which I splashed at every second step. It is not an immense hardship to walk down a wet street on a stormy night, but at my age one does not despise such consolation as the minor comforts of life afford; and whilst the beating rain

damped a little the first heat and ardour of my passion, yet when I thought of my deserted fire and arm-chair, I felt even less charitably disposed than before towards everyone concerned in this childish and yet most iniquitous business. I was drenched by the time I reached Countess Zelowsky's house; but if anything could have afforded me content at that moment, I should have found it in the thought of bringing my mud-stained boots and dripping garments into her cushioned and perfumed apartment. I believe I felt brutal—a sentiment, I need not say, in which no Church of England parson ought to indulge for a moment.

The man-servant who opened the door stared at me. The Signora Contessa was invisible, he said; she had retired for the night, she was ill, she had been in bed all day, it was impossible that she should receive me. 'Tell her,' I said, giving the

man my card, 'that Dr. Somers demands to see her on a subject of the utmost importance, and refuses to leave the house until he shall have had five minutes' conversation with her. She will receive me, I assure you.'

The man stared again and retired. In a moment he returned and introduced me into the well-known little salon. It was empty, but lamps were burning and a fire blazed brightly. I knew the Countess's habits well, and that she seldom retired before midnight; often, indeed, turning night into day, and keeping her establishment out of bed until three or four in the morning. That she had been sitting in this room was evident, for the sofa-cushions were disarranged and an open book lay face downwards on the couch; probably she had only retired to give herself the advantage of an entry. In a few minutes in fact, she appeared, in a sort of loose trail-

ing robe, an air of suffering, and a black lace mantilla thrown over her head, the folds of which she held gathered together with her right hand under her chin.

'Dr. Somers,' she said, presenting me with her left hand, and sinking into a chair, 'how you have startled me. What has happened? I am suffering to-night acutely; and I was already in my room when your card and message were brought me.'

'Pardon me, Countess,' I said. 'I am here in the interests of a lady who is suffering still more acutely than yourself, or I should not have ventured to disturb you at this hour. I have just left Lady Margaret St. Just in a state which at her age and with her frail health I must regard as in the highest degree critical. I have come to you to beg you to furnish me with the name of the Leghorn hotel to which her granddaughter has gone.'

'Her granddaughter!' said the Countess, faintly.

'Certainly—her granddaughter and my goddaughter, Elisabeth St. Just. By her own account, she left your house to-night accompanied by your maid. You must be intimately acquainted with her movements.'

'Dr. Somers,' said the Countess, letting her hands fall into her lap. 'I assure you positively that I am in no way responsible for Miss St. Just's proceedings. I think the step she has taken to-night an extremely rash and foolish one. I would have prevented it had I been able.'

'You do not believe me,' she went on, as I did not immediately reply.

'Pardon me,' I said, 'that is an assumption I cannot permit for a moment. At the same time, if I am not mistaken, Miss St. Just has had opportunities afforded her here for meeting this young Italian

in a way that would have been impossible at her grandmother's house. Is it not true that they have met here more than once during the last three weeks?'

'Ah, for that,' said the Countess, with a sigh, 'it is true, and I regret nothing more in this unfortunate business than that it should have brought that delightful intercourse to a close. You have heard of elective affinities, of course, Dr. Somers? Ah yes; there is not one of us that has not had some such experience, painful and beautiful alike. But I never saw a more perfect example than in these two young people. Their souls seemed absolutely made for each other; one would have said that each had been waiting for the other to live for the first time. And as regards my spiritualist theory—you will not have forgotten it—of communication with the unseen world through the medium of a perfect sympathy——'

'Pardon me,' I said again, 'but my time is limited. Would you kindly furnish me with the name of the hotel or lodging to which Miss St. Just has gone to-night in Leghorn?'

'Miss St. Just,' replied the Countess, not directly answering my question, 'has in my opinion, acted with extreme folly in writing as she did to her grandmother. Having determined upon this step, such a letter at this moment could only introduce useless complications. But like most young people, doctor, she was convinced that her own way was the best. She affirmed that she preferred to act with perfect frankness, and that her will was strong enough to assert itself against all obstacles. But had she followed my advice, she would have been silent.'

'And yet, madame,' I said, 'you affirm that all this scandalous business has been carried on against your consent.'

'I affirm it with perfect truth,' cried the Countess, 'I give you my word of honour, Dr. Somers, that I did everything in my power to dissuade Miss St. Just from what I regard as a horrible *esclandre*. Good heavens, am I a person to approve of a young woman of birth and fortune running away like a kitchen-maid? Only when I found that her mind was absolutely set upon it, I agreed that she should start from my house, and persuaded her to allow my maid—whom I dismiss, of course, from my service to-morrow—to accompany her to-night, so as to save appearances as as much as possible. I presume, doctor, that you do not disapprove of my conduct in that respect, and that you would not prefer that your goddaughter should have eloped from the hotel and been joined by her lover at the railway-station to-night.'

It was a new view of the question, I was forced to admit. But the whole busi-

ness was so disgraceful to all concerned that I felt little mollified.

'Her lover will join her to-morrow,' I said, 'unless I am in time to prevent it. I go to Leghorn by the first train; and if you, madame, will direct me to the hotel where I am likely to find Miss St. Just, you will spare me no little time and trouble, to say the least. You would oblige me infinitely by so doing; and if, as you say, you disapprove of this whole affair, I am at a loss to understand the hesitation you seem to feel—as I am at a loss,' I added, 'to understand why, when you saw the turn things were taking, you did not apprise Lady Margaret, and put a stop to it.'

'I am not Miss St. Just's keeper,' answered the Countess, with coldness; 'she is of age and competent, according to your English ideas, to manage her own affairs. It was no business of mine to interfere between her and her grandmother, with whom

I have only a very slight acquaintance. And for the rest,' she went on, smiling a little and beginning to play with the large fan at her side, 'I am in Miss St. Just's confidence, and have no right to betray what she has not chosen to reveal. You, dear doctor, with your strict principles, will not fail to appreciate such a motive, I am sure.'

She smiled again with the last words. I believe she had spoken with perfect sincerity in her condemnation of Elisabeth's flight, that she had done what she could by argument and dissuasion to prevent it. It had scared her probably; she had looked both pale and agitated when she entered the room. But the mere fact that Countess Zelowsky found herself confronted by a man, was sufficient to arouse in her one of the strongest instincts of womanhood as she understood it—the desire to try her power. Yes, she had set herself, as I saw by a

well-known gleam in her eye, to be both obstinate and provoking—to amuse herself, in short; and I was in no temper to submit to such a mood. Nor was I in the temper to try to flatter her out of it. Lady Margaret's face was before me, and the urgent necessity for no delay in finding Elisabeth on the morrow; and the moment to me was a tragic one. Plain speech remained, but to plain speech the Countess would not always listen. Nevertheless, I determined to make an appeal to that better nature in which a large experience of my fellow-creatures has taught me to have an inalienable belief.

'Countess Zelowsky,' I said, 'half-an-hour ago I left Lady Margaret St. Just in what I believe to be an almost dying state. She worshipped her granddaughter—with little enough reason, heaven knows; but so it was. I verily believe that poor woman's one chance of life depends on

my restoring my goddaughter to her. If, for any reason, I fail to find Elisabeth, I do not believe she will be alive to-morrow night.'

The Countess slightly shrugged her shoulders. 'She should have looked after her granddaughter better,' was all she said.

I made no attempt to argue the point; it would have been useless. I tried another tack.

'We are old friends, Countess,' I said. 'It is now several years that we have known each other with some degree of intimacy.'

'It is indeed,' she said, looking up at me. 'Ah, Dr. Somers, the one redeeming feature of growing old is that we learn to value old friendships. What precious memories they leave! and there are none, believe me, that I value more than those left by the hours we once spent together.

I used to play to you; do you remember? Would you like me to play now? I often begin at this hour and go on till two or three in the morning; there is something—I could hardly explain it—that inspires one, and renders one insensible to fatigue. Sometimes I simply sit with my hands on the keys, and melodies seem to flow round me. It is a strange experience.'

'Old friendships leave memories, Countess,' I replied, 'but they leave duties also—or so I have always believed; obligations, the payment of reciprocal debts and so on.'

'Friends do not remind each other of these things,' said the Countess softly.

'Not as a rule—no; they keep them in mind and pay them when occasion arises without necessity of speech. I, Countess, owe you not a few obligations for your charming music, and for the kind attention with which in former days you

listened to remarks from me that repetition may have made a little wearisome.

'And I——?' she said, smiling. 'Ah! let the debt remain unpaid. There is nothing but what is sweet in the sense of obligation between friends.'

'I am not jesting,' I answered, 'it is in all seriousness that I appeal to the memory of those days, in the persuasion that it will induce you to do me the essential service I ask of you. There was a time, Countess, when from the midst of your own deep trouble, you appealed to me for help; when you assured me that that help had not been in vain. They were not light matters that occupied us then, but the deepest truths with which humanity can concern itself. My words had power to console you, or so you told me; for a time at any rate they helped to smooth and lighten a dark and difficult passage of your life. As one of God's

ministers, no less than as a friend, I spoke to you then; in the same character, and by the memory of those days, I appeal to you to-night.'

I spoke with solemnity; and as I spoke, her restless movements ceased, her head sank a little, she sat motionless. For three, for five minutes perhaps, she did not move; then quickly, without a word, she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes; and turning her back upon me, drew towards her a small table that stood at the foot of the sofa, tore a leaf from a note-book lying there, and wrote something on it in pencil. Rising, and still with averted head, she put it into my hand with a momentary pressure of her fingers. 'Good-night and good-bye,' she said; and before I could speak, she had vanished from the room.

By the light of the lamp in the hall below, I read what was written on the

scrap of paper. It was the name of the inn in Leghorn; below, in half-illegible characters: '*Priez pour moi.*' If I slightly shrugged my shoulders at the moment, I trust I may be forgiven. I have thought better of it since; for after all, we are all frail human creatures together, and need each other's prayers, God knows. I have thought better of it since, as time has softened my recollection of Countess Zelowsky, for it so happens that since that night I have never seen her. She returned to St. Petersburg the following autumn, accompanied by her young cousin, who, as I heard, was shortly afterwards married to the brown-faced Prince Sergius; and by neither word nor sign has my old Florentine acquaintance communicated with me again.

I was in Leghorn before noon the following day, and had myself at once driven to the hotel whose name had been furnish-

ed me by Countess Zelowsky. It was an inn rather than an hotel, hardly more indeed than a trattoria; a rough little place, thoroughly Italian in character, but not wanting in cleanliness. It had been chosen presumably, by Dino Morelli, in the idea that it was a place where my goddaughter's arrival might excite less attention than in one of the hotels frequented by foreigners; certainly I myself might have sought long through Leghorn before finding it. But in truth, I am not prepared to assume he had any such reason. The whole scheme was so wild, so unconnected with practical life, so invented, to all appearance, in the determination to live through at least one chapter of romance, that it were useless to attempt to frame any reasonable theory in the matter.

The front door stood open, and I entered a narrow hall that, running through the house, showed an open door at the other

end leading into a little courtyard or garden, where tables were set beneath trellised vines whose fresh green was just beginning to spread. A man appeared from a small room on one side of the passage, and inquired my business.

'I wish to see the English lady who arrived last night,' I said. 'Have the goodness to show me to her room. I am in haste, and have business that admits of no delay.'

'I think she is engaged,' replied the man; 'a gentleman called here a few minutes ago and asked to see her. I think he is with her now.'

'The gentleman is gone,' said a second man who had just come up; 'he went away a minute ago. But he said he should be back in five minutes, and that a carriage was to be ready to take the lady down to the boat.'

'In that case, show me to her room at

once,' I said—'there is no time to lose.'

The man who had first spoken, and whom I assumed to be the padrone, looked at me with some curiosity, I thought; but without further parley, he led the way with a lounging step along the passage, up a flight of stone stairs to the first landing, where he knocked at a closed door. A voice from within answered; and opening the door, he announced a visitor for the young lady, and stood aside to let me pass. The morning was bright after last night's storm, and a dazzle of sunlight through an open window was what first caught my attention; but as my vision cleared, I saw that I was in a square, barely-furnished apartment, a small public room probably, used when the larger restaurant below was full. A table pushed back against the wall and some straw chairs were the only furniture; through the unshaded window came the sunshine

and between red house-roofs a dazzle of blue sea far-off against the sky. My goddaughter was seated near the windows, her back to the door; but she turned and slowly rose as I entered, a dark slender figure against the light, in her usual austere garb, with the pale gold of her hair shining in the sun. A long cloak, fastened at the throat, hung round her in straight folds; in her hand she held her black straw hat. She looked at me for a moment with a startled glance, but for a moment only; then her eyes took again the visionary look with which I was familiar.

'Elisabeth,' I said, walking straight up to her and taking her hand, 'I have come to take you home again.'

'Oh, no,' she said, in her usual cold, gentle tones, withdrawing her hand from mine, 'that is impossible.'

'Why impossible?' I said. 'You have

taken a very foolish step, but fortunately it is not too late to retrieve it. Return with me to Florence, and all will be as before.'

'It is impossible,' she repeated; 'if I had intended to retrieve the step, I should not have taken it. I have done it with my eyes open. I know what I am about.'

'I doubt it, my dear,' I answered; 'I never doubted anything more in my life. Here, to set the matter plainly, is a young fellow whom you have known for three weeks——'

'Three weeks!' she said, as who should say, 'An eternity!' 'Oh,' she said, 'every minute of it has been longer than all my life hitherto. I have lived for the first time.'

Her eyes began to flame. Certainly my goddaughter had the strangest eyes I have ever seen. In whatever chamber of her being the soul of which she was fond of talking may have lain dormant, no sooner

was it touched than it began to blaze through her eyes. She was transfigured.

'Ah, here we are again!' I cried, in vexation; 'you talk about life, my dear, as a robin that has never left its nest might talk about the ocean. You each of you know about as much of the other. And now you propose to confront it with this young Italian whom a month ago had you not even seen.'

'I love him,' she said, spreading out her hands and letting them fall at her side. There was nothing theatrical in the gesture. Whatever my goddaughter said and did was absolutely genuine. She was, I believe, incapable of affectation. It was the redeeming point of a character that affected me as singularly antagonistic and unpleasant.

'Every young girl, I suppose, since the beginning of the world has loved, or thought she loved, some young man,' I

answered, 'but fortunately they have not all thought it necessary to behave as you have done, Elisabeth. What in heaven's name was your motive in running away in this indecent haste, instead of remaining with your grandmother and marrying with her permission—if to marry this young fellow you are determined.'

'Grandmamma would never have given her permission,' she answered, in her impassive voice, 'and I do not know what you mean by indecent haste. I cannot remember the time that I did not know Dino. I had never existed before.'

'Nonsense,' I cried, losing patience at this iteration of her favourite phrase, 'or if it is true, so much the worse for you, my dear. What, you have lived for twenty-one years in the world and have tried to do your duty, as I hope, to God and your fellow-creatures—for, upon my word, until yesterday I gave you credit for being a

good girl—and you tell me that you never existed before? Do duty and natural affection and the simple and honest affections of youth count for nothing, then, in life?'

She did not answer, but her face took the look that I own had the power to provoke me, the look that maintained the superior wisdom of her youth over the experience of my age. I recovered my temper, however. Dino Morelli might at any moment return; the minutes were precious.

'My dear,' I said, gravely, 'all this is not what I came to say. I am here as a messenger from your grandmother. She is almost broken-hearted by this step you have taken.'

'Oh, you are wrong,' she answered gently, 'grandmamma will not care at all. She will not like my marrying Dino; that is why I have left her. But that is all.'

'That is not all,' I said; 'your grandmother has for you the warmest, the most devoted affection—though it may be an affection you have not understood, since it proceeds from one of the purest and simplest and most unselfish hearts that ever existed. You—and you yourself best know how much you have deserved it—were the treasure of her life, the great blessing as she has told me again and again that God had sent to comfort her old age.'

She looked at me, but I could not see that my words had moved her in the least. I went on quickly.

'I believe,' I said, 'that you have, in fact, to some extent deserved that affection. If you have had no love to give your grandmother, you have at least given her duty. You have tended her, I know, read to her, tried to fulfil her wishes. You yourself, the first time I saw you, told me so, did you not?'

'Yes,' she said, mechanically, 'I thought it was right—I want to do what is right.'

'Yes, yes, I know you do,' I said; 'you are a good girl; I have always said so. Yes, I remember you had a good deal to say about that the first time we talked together; about doing right, and self-sacrifice, and so on. Well, here is your opportunity.'

Her eyes dilated, but she did not speak.

'I saw Lady Margaret last night,' I went on; 'she had sent to me in the desperate grief and trouble caused by your letter. I stayed with her for five minutes only; she could hardly speak, she would have had no strength for a longer interview. She had the look of one who had received a death-blow, and it had been dealt by your hand. I should not expect to see her alive again, but that I promised to follow and bring you back. If I return alone,

she will not survive the shock, I am convinced. Elisabeth, you will not refuse to come?'

'You don't know what you ask,' she cried, putting out her hands. 'I refuse; yes, I refuse.'

'I don't know what I ask?' I said. 'I ask you to return to a parent who loves you, whose life your culpable folly has endangered, whose existence hangs on the hope of seeing you again; and I don't know what I ask? Set matters at the worst; say that I demand of you the sacrifice of what at this moment you hold dearest in life; what then? Of each one among us some such sacrifice is demanded at times; and he is noblest who gives most willingly.'

She turned very pale, and began to tremble. A look of fear came into her face.

'Come,' I said, solemnly, touching her cold hand, 'I do not speak lightly, my

dear; and if I demand a sacrifice, it is not without reason. If your grandmother dies you will have killed her no less surely than if your own hand had given the death-stroke.'

She turned her face to me, the look of terror growing more intense as her eyes met mine. At that moment, a gay whistle was heard outside, and a springing footstep mounting the staircase two or three steps at a time.

'Dino!' she cried. With a swift movement she passed me, and throwing herself into his arms as he appeared on the threshold, hid her face on his shoulder. Her movement arrested him; he clasped her tightly to his breast, and looking round his glance encountered mine. 'What is the meaning of this?' he said, fiercely, 'what do you intend by this intrusion?'

'I intend no intrusion,' I answered, 'and with you, Signor Morelli, I have

nothing to do one way or another. I am here to fetch Miss St. Just to her grandmother, who is dying.'

He looked at me for a moment with an angry gaze, but made no answer; I am not sure that he even took in the sense of what I said. Turning to Elisabeth, he began gently to caress her hair, murmuring some words the while in a low voice. She did not speak in reply, she clung to him more convulsively; till her hold relaxing, her arms fell at her side, she sank back into a chair. He went and stood opposite to her, holding out his hands.

'Lisa!' he said, softly.

She looked up, their eyes met, and she put her hands into his. A smile came to her lips as she gazed at him; they had forgotten my presence in each other, and for the first time I understood how fair my goddaughter's face could be. Shall I own it? As those

two beautiful young heads leaned towards each other, a rush of sympathy came over me; of sympathy with love and youth and joy, the fire of youth, its divine joy. Yes, I could have found it in me to pass quietly from the room, to close the door behind me, to leave the two alone in the sunlight of their love. But with the thought came the memory of my own young days and of Lady Margaret; and my heart hardened as I looked towards them again. For that moment's space neither had stirred; but now Morelli, stooping down, lifted her hands as though to raise her from her seat.

'We must go, my beloved,' he said, 'the carriage is waiting.'

Her face changed, and took the expression of terror it had worn but a minute before. She looked round at me. I came forward, and addressed the young Italian.

'Pardon me if I interfere with your arrangements,' I said, 'but I am come expressly to take Miss St. Just back to Florence.'

'She will not consent,' he cried, turning on me, 'nothing can come between us now—nothing. Is it not so?' he said, with a softened voice to Elisabeth. She had risen, and was trembling from head to foot. He put his arm round her and drew her gently towards the door. 'Come, my beloved,' he said again.

'Elisabeth!' I said.

She stopped and turned her face towards me.

'What do you want, oh, what do you want?' she said, clasping and unclasping her hands.

'Signor Morelli,' I said, 'listen to reason. Miss St. Just's abrupt departure from Florence has given Lady Margaret a shock from which there is little hope of

recovery except by the return of her granddaughter. Allow Miss St. Just to return with me now; you can follow her later, and make your own representations to her grandmother.'

'I don't believe a word of it,' he cried, with fury, 'it is a made-up story to separate us. You yourself told me her family would never consent to our marriage; and if she were to leave me now, I swear by heaven I would never forgive her.'

He turned to her, his eyes blazing under his dark eyebrows. She had dropped again into the chair, and was sitting with her face hidden in her hands. His look melted; he knelt down and put his arms about her. She moved her hands and placing them on his shoulder, let her face fall upon them. He looked at me in triumph.

'You see?' he said. 'Nothing can separate us now.'

'You mean then,' I said, slowly, 'that Miss St. Just should henceforth go through life with the weight of an irreparable sin on her soul, the sin of a parent's death. Elisabeth, is that your meaning?'

She shivered without speaking. For a minute longer she sat motionless; then with a sudden movement, a sort of austere passion, characteristic as it was strange, she lifted her head and kissed the shoulder it had rested on again and again. Rising, she turned to me. Her face was quite calm, but it was like the face of the dead.

'I will go with you, Dr. Somers,' she said.

'By heaven, you shall not,' cried Morelli, springing to his feet. Something flashed in his hand; I caught him by the wrist as he rushed towards her, and wrenching a knife from him, flung it to the furthest corner of the room. It was only an ordinary clasp-knife, but it had a

blade three inches long. He turned upon me with violence; but Elisabeth quietly picking up the knife, held it out to him.

'End it so,' she said, 'it will be best so. Life in any case is ended for me.'

For a moment he looked at her uncertainly; then dashing aside her hand and the knife together, he caught her like a whirlwind in his arms, in an embrace so close and passionate, that I thought breath and life would fail her together. Releasing her by a movement as sudden, he fell before her on his knees, seizing her hands, and holding them tightly pressed against his breast. The tears rushed to his eyes.

'Come,' he said, 'for God's sake, Lisa, come; don't play me false. Come, my beloved.'

He tried to draw her forward again. She did not speak in answer; she had hardly spoken throughout. But the colour died entirely out of her face, she

withdrew one hand and putting it behind her, involuntarily caught at my arm for support. The movement seemed to stab the young fellow to the heart. He bounded up, his teeth set, his face pale almost as her own.

'You will not come?' he said, 'then I swear by heaven and earth and the powers of hell below, I will never forgive you—never.'

The next moment he was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

On a day in spring, about a year later, I was seated in a train between Genoa and Pisa. I was on my way to Florence again, and again with a view to seeing Lady Margaret and my goddaughter. Lady Margaret had lived, but she had never recovered from the illness that followed Elisabeth's flight. Even more than before she was now a frail and shattered old woman, creeping from one health-resort to another; striving vainly, by the advice of one physician and another, to warm and brighten the expiring embers of her life. Of my goddaughter I knew nothing, but that she remained with Lady Margaret.

My old friend wrote to me occasionally, but only a few quavering words, hardly legible at times in her trembling handwriting. One of these missives had reached me not long before. 'We again spend May in Florence this year,' she wrote, 'do you not think of paying your annual visit to Italy? It would be a pleasure to see you once more before I die. Elisabeth is good to me as always, but I am very much alone.'

On one of the first days in May then, I found myself nearing Pisa, admiring with an admiration that has never yet grown weaker, the sweet and jocund aspect of the Italian land in the Italian May, the dancing, vine-wreathed trees, the plains green with corn and grey with olives, against the colouring at once delicate and austere of the sunlit background of hills. I was alone, with the exception of a priest seated in the further corner of the car-

riage, reading his breviary; a figure and an occupation too ordinary to attract more than a passing attention. Presently, however, he closed his book; and after gazing a minute from the window, rose, and moving down the compartment, took the seat opposite mine. Then something familiar in his movement and in his face struck me; with a profound astonishment I recognised Dino Morelli. And yet to this day I marvel at the recognition, so great was the change, not merely in costume but in countenance. The beaming expansive look which had won my heart when I first met the young fellow in the gallery of the Uffizi, was gone; his downcast eyes seemed to have grown smaller; certain lines, and not pleasant ones, had worn themselves about his mouth and brow, the lines drawn when the hard, narrow egotism of age begins to supplant the egotistic but generous passions of youth, and

which never bear so hard a meaning as when seen on a face that has still something of freshness and bloom. He smiled and bowed, however, when he saw that I recognised him, and with the charming Italian smile some of his former charm of countenance returned.

'I knew you at once,' he said, 'when you entered the carriage; but I saw you did not know me.'

'Well,' I said, 'I imagine that the last twelvemonth has made less change in my appearance than in yours. The last thing I should have expected from what I knew of you formerly, is to find you in your present dress.'

He opened his lips to speak, but changed his mind apparently. What he said finally was different, I imagine, from his first intention.

'I must not,' he said with a smile, 'expect, I suppose, a minister of your

persuasion to sympathise cordially with the step I have taken. But as a student of human nature, you can hardly fail to understand the possibility of mental revolutions that may entirely reverse a man's point of view, and place him in a wholly new attitude towards himself and the universe.'

'Yes, yes,' I said, 'I am pretty well used to the vagaries of human nature by this time. And how about your art? For you had a good deal to say about that when I last had the pleasure of your acquaintance.'

'Naturally,' he said, folding his hands and casting down his eyes, 'the serious and absorbing duties of my present office leave me no time for any other occupation.'

I sat looking at him for a while in silence. As is natural, perhaps, I am not fond of priests as a class, though I have

met with some excellent good ones; and something about this young man struck me as unreal and disagreeable. I had often thought of him since the day we parted at Leghorn, and wondered what had become of him; and now, in spite of his priestly garb, I believed that he was no more a priest at heart than he had been when he expounded his views on the subject of the priesthood on our walk home from the Uffizi. He was the first to speak again.

'You are going to Florence, I presume?' he said, in a tone of courteous inquiry.

'That is my destination,' I replied.

'To see your goddaughter, Miss St. Just, perhaps,' he went on, in the same tone. 'I understand that she is there.'

'And how, in the name of all that ought not to concern you, do you know that?' I said to myself. 'And what does

it matter to you now?' But I only replied, 'You are perfectly right. I am on my way to Florence to see my old friend Lady Margaret St. Just and her granddaughter.'

He was silent for a minute, then fixed his eyes on mine. 'I have a request to make,' he said; 'when you see Miss St. Just, and should she happen to mention my name, may I beg you to say nothing to her concerning my present life? It is possible she may not have heard of the step I have taken. I could wish that for the present it should remain unknown to her.'

'What now?' I cried. 'What have you to do now with Miss St. Just, or what need is there for any affectation of mystery between you? You have separated yourself from her definitively; and I own that with the dress you now wear and the creed that you profess, it surprises me

to hear you even mention her name.'

We were approaching Pisa, where we were to change trains. He rose, and took his travelling-bag from the netting overhead.

'I have, at least, no desire,' he said, with his downcast eyes, 'to discuss that lady with you or with anyone else. For the rest, Signor Somers, in consideration of the past, I should have thought I had a claim upon you for at least some slight favour.'

I was taken aback. Yes, I suppose in this young fellow's opinion I had worked him all the harm of which I was capable. 'Well, well,' I said, relenting; reflecting too that nothing was less likely than that my taciturn goddaughter should bring forward the subject.

'Oh, I insist upon nothing,' he said, very frigidly; and the train stopping at that moment, he ceremoniously raised his

hat, and left the carriage. I lost sight of him during the half-hour's delay, and when we moved out of the station, I was doubtful whether he had remained behind, or whether he were in a different carriage of the train from myself.

I went the following day to the Lung' Arno hotel, where my old friend occupied the same apartment as in the previous year. I timed my visit to suit her old habits, to find her after her afternoon drive; but her old habits were changed, I found. She was able to go out very little, so she presently told me; sometimes she did not even leave her room for nearly a week at a time. She spoke in a very gentle voice, sinking now and then into almost a whisper; our interview was not a long one; she had no strength for many words. Something she said to me of the death she felt fast approaching; something she asked of me and I said to her, of the

eternal consolations of which I have often had occasion to speak, but never to a purer, sweeter, more loving soul. At last she spoke of Elisabeth.

'She is out now,' she said; 'come in again, Dr. Somers, after dinner, and see her. She spends much of her time alone, poor child; I am very rarely able to bear much society in the evening. She has been a good child to me; all the better that I see now, as my mind gets clearer on some points, that she has no love to give me. It might have been wiser had I allowed her to marry that young Italian. I fear I was very selfish.'

'You selfish!' I said.

'Yes,' she answered, 'we old people are often very selfish in our demands upon young lives. We forget that the joy their youth and strength give us can mean very little to them. Elisabeth has a nature altogether different from her father's,' she

went on; 'I did not understand it at first, but I understand it now, though I do not altogether understand her. No, that I never shall do," she said, with a smile, "but I know how good she has been to me. In this last year she has never left me for a day; and there has been no wish of mine she could fulfil, that she has not done her best to accomplish. I have been very selfish, I fear, but it is too late to change now. It will soon be over, and then she will not repent, I know, that she has done what she could for me. That is my comfort.'

I presently left my old friend. Alas! I saw her no more. Only the next day she became very much worse; and three days later she died, gently and peacefully as she had lived.

I left her and went back to my own inn to dine; but after dinner I returned in the hope of seeing my goddaughter. I was

shown into the little salon looking out upon the Arno. The days were long now, and it was still light; but the weather was close and stormy, and the sky was darkened by black rain-clouds overhead, by heavy cloud-layers to the west, below which the sun sinking to the hills, illuminated the city, its domes and towers and bridges, with a brilliant partial gleam. Elisabeth was standing with her back to me at the open window, gazing intently as it seemed on the scene below, the river running dark with gleaming reflections, the wet pavements, the windows shining on the heights, the passing carriages and carts catching bright lights on every salient point of harness as they crossed the bridges; all in the strange glow and darkness of the rain-laden, sun-illumined sky. She was dressed in white and held a book in her hand; and the light shining on her hair, turning it to pale gold-colour, recalled to me, to-

gether with the suggestion of some impassive mediæval saint that always clung to my strange goddaughter, the morning I had gone to her in Leghorn. I had never seen her since. I had remained, indeed, long enough in Florence to assure myself that Lady Margaret was out of danger; but Elisabeth, as was natural enough perhaps, had shunned me. So I presumed, at least, as she had remained invisible.

She turned now, as I advanced towards her; and closing the window, gave me her hand.

'Grandmamma told me you had come,' she said, in the gentle indifferent voice that I remembered. 'I was to expect you this evening, she said.'

'How are you, my dear?' I inquired, taking her hand, and studying her face by the sunset light. It was strangely changed, at once more and less beautiful; less beautiful because the first indefinable and

exquisite bloom of youth was gone; the outline was thinner and harder; she was pale, and her eyelids had a reddened look as with tears or with long watching; more beautiful, because the immobility of expression was gone also, though she tried hard to preserve it beneath my gaze. Her lips trembled a little, her eyes shifting uneasily, met mine at last with an eager, questioning look; a flush rose to her cheeks and faded and rose again. This was not the Elisabeth I had known a year ago, but a much more breathing, human, sympathetic being. I felt profoundly sorry for her. Poor child, she had learnt something of the meaning of life by this time.

'How are you, my dear,' I said again. 'You are looking pale, do you know? Your grandmother has been telling me of all the goodness and attention you show her; but you must not overtax yourself. That is the last thing she would desire.'

'Oh, no,' she said, gently, 'there is no fear of that. Grandmamma requires so little done for her now, and always less. Sometimes I see her for hardly more than half-an-hour in the day.'

'That must leave you very much alone,' I said, 'you must find it dull, I fear. Have you any friends in Florence? How do you pass your time?'

'I have no friends,' she answered, 'I work a good deal; I have always liked needlework. I prefer to be alone.'

I glanced round the room and saw in fact, a big basket, piled up with calico and heavy woollen stuffs on the floor; whilst on the table lay some coarse, half-made garment. Elisabeth was gazing again from the window at the lights kindling on the bridges and the quays, and the river flowing golden now between its dark banks to the far-off misty hills. All at once she turned to me with joined hands as

though moved by an irresistible impulse.

'Dr. Somers,' she said, 'can you tell me anything of Dino Morelli?'

'Of Dino Morelli?' I said, taken aback.

'Oh, yes, of Dino,' she said, 'oh, is he alive, or is he dead? I can bear either if I only know. Oh, do you know?'

'Certainly I believe he is alive,' I said, in some confusion; 'yes, I know it for a fact. Do you mean you have heard nothing of him?'

'Never since that day we parted at Leghorn,' she said, letting her hands fall, 'never a word; not one word. At first I hoped and hoped, and then I gave up hoping. I thought at last he must be dead; but if he is alive, it is that he has not forgiven me. No, he has never forgiven me.'

'Oh, he is alive,' I said, 'there's no doubt about that. Not that I know

where he is at present,' I added, hastily.

'Oh, it is no matter,' she answered; 'if he had forgiven me he would have come to me long ago. He told me once that he never forgave; and this is how he has revenged himself. And he is right; but I would rather he had killed me on the spot; then all would have been over long ago. Oh, it was wicked of me; wicked to leave him. We were each other's life, each other's soul; if I had murdered him and then myself, it would not have been so bad. But I have thought that God would forgive me, perhaps, and then that he would also. I have done penance, I have fasted, I would have gone in sackcloth if I could; but it has been all of no avail, I know now that he will never forgive me. And I deserve it.'

She raised her face with wild eyes to the sky. As for me, some words I had heard Dino Morelli speak the first day

that I met him, came back to my mind. 'I can imagine two passions,' he had said, 'satisfying one: love and revenge.' I laid my hand on my goddaughter's shoulder.

'My dear,' I said, 'you look at this matter wrongly. You were in the right to return to your grandmother. Would you indeed have cared to go through the world with the possible guilt of her death on your conscience?'

Her face took a hard look. 'Grandmamma is dying,' she said, 'I have prolonged her life a year; it has not been a happy one for her. And if of two crimes, I had to choose one, I chose the greater. Would to God Dino had killed me there; then he would perhaps have forgiven me. Would to God I could go to him now. But I cannot—I cannot, if he makes no sign, though I would go to him on my knees.'

I was about to answer—who shall say how? I had given no pledge to Dino Morelli; my goddaughter ought to know the truth; and yet I shrank from revealing it. But I was about at least to bid her put him for ever out of her mind, when a knock came at the door, and a hotel servant entered with a card on a waiter. The sun had set in these last few minutes; the room within was darkening fast; and Elisabeth, mechanically advancing to take the card, returned to the window to read the name on it by the light still lingering outside. It dropped from her fingers to the ground.

'Dino!' she cried, with a mighty cry.

The servant had retired, and in his place a dark form advanced slowly into the shadows of the twilight room. The girl rushed forward, and fell on her knees before him in the middle of the floor, with outstretched arms.

'Forgive me, Dino,' she cried, 'and take me. I am yours.'

He drew back a step.

'I am a priest,' he said.

'And what was the end?' some one inquired as Dr. Somers paused.

'Ah, the end was sad,' he answered. 'I saw my goddaughter only once again, and for a few minutes only, on the day of her grandmother's funeral; and then, through design on her part, I suspect, I was unable to hold any conversation with her. The day after, she disappeared, leaving absolutely no trace. Some jewels that she possessed, valuable ones, she took with her; and two days previously she had drawn a very considerable sum of money, through a cheque on her London banker, from one of the Florence banks. Those were all the facts that were known; but when I learned, on inquiry, that Dino

Morelli had disappeared also, I found no difficulty in filling up the sad blank. The fugitives hid themselves well; and of one of the two nothing has ever been heard since. But about five years ago I received a letter from the Superior of a French Canadian convent. It told me that, some six months previously, a young woman, broken in spirit and body alike, had presented herself at their house, and had begged to be sheltered among them. She gave no account of herself, she would not even reveal her true name; but she handed over to them what money she possessed, and out of compassion they received her. For a while she rallied a little to distinguish herself by the austerity of her penitential and religious observances; then her strength suddenly giving way, she died after two days' illness, during which she preserved the same unbroken silence concerning her past. On examining her effects

after her death, nothing was found to lead to her identification but an empty envelope addressed to myself. The envelope was enclosed in the Superior's letter; I recognised the handwriting; it was Elisabeth's. A lawyer was at once sent out to Canada; matters connected with her family and the succession of her fortune, rendering it essential that her death should, if possible, be verified; and the details he learned at the convent removed any doubt, if such had remained in my mind, as to the tragic close of my goddaughter's life.

'Had she intended to write to me, and then had strength or resolution failed her? I shall never know now; but my heart bled for her, not for the first time, poor child, when I saw her writing again.'

'Well, it was a singular character,' said one of the party, after a pause. 'How do you, Dr. Somers, explain it?'

'I don't explain it,' he said, 'and all

that I ever knew of her, I have told you. But I imagine her to have been animated, for good as for evil, by an immense egotism; and I imagine it the more readily that experience has shown me for how much egotism counts in the vagaries, both good and bad, of us poor human beings.'

THE END

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